

3 Tips for Detecting Substance Abuse in Senior Caregivers that Only Family Needs to Know

When you think about a person who struggles with substance abuse, you may not picture a senior citizen. Yet, the prevalence of [substance abuse problems](#) among seniors has been rising for more than 15 years. In fact, Johns Hopkins Medical School notes that the number of Americans aged 50 and over who abuse prescription medication will rise to 2.7 million in 2020, which is a 190% increase from 2001.

Another [study](#) in the Journal of General Internal Medicine found that more than 33% of drinkers aged 60 and older drink excessive amounts of alcohol that can be deadly when combined with certain diseases or medications. Senior substance abuse is alarming; it becomes more alarming when the senior is a caregiver to another senior. If you fear that your loved one has a substance abuse problem while caring for a family member, you need to know how to detect it so you can guide her toward getting help.

1. Keep Tabs on Your Loved One's Mental State

Serving as a caregiver takes a mental and physical toll on even young, agile family members; it takes a great deal more out of seniors. [Research](#) shows that family caregivers experience more emotional, mental, and physical health problems than their non-



caregiving peers. Specifically, caregivers have “higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health effects.” In fact, an estimated 40%-70% of caregivers have clinically significant symptoms of depression, and 25%-50% of those live with major depression.

Depression coexists with substance abuse issues, and senior caregivers have an especially hard time managing their isolation, loneliness, boredom, and grief. As a result, they often turn to [drugs and alcohol](#) to self-medicate. That’s why family members need to keep tabs on senior caregiver’s mental state. If your loved one exhibits signs or symptoms of depression or chronic stress, you need to understand she is at a higher risk of developing a substance abuse problem. If she begins to neglect her appearance or physical health, it is a warning sign that her mental health is suffering and you need to guide her toward getting help.

2. Know to Which Medications Senior Caregivers Have Access

One of the contributing factors to the rise in senior substance abuse is their [access to prescription medication](#). It is all too common for seniors to see multiple doctors for various ailments, only to be prescribed sleeping pills, antidepressants, and other medications that are powerful and often should not be combined.

When the senior cares for a family member and also has access to his medication, she has a greater opportunity to become addicted to prescription medication. You need to be aware of which medication your senior loved ones have access to so you can ensure they use them safely and as prescribed. Discuss the effects of the medication with them and make sure they understand which should not be combined with over-the-counter medications, other prescription medications, or with alcohol.

3. Be Aware of the Signs and Symptoms of Substance Abuse in Seniors

You also need to be aware of the [signs and symptoms](#) of substance abuse in seniors. The first step is being aware of the very real possibility that your loved one already has a substance abuse problem because she is dealing with the strains of caregiving.

The second step is understanding that substance abuse warning signs in seniors often get overlooked because they are similar to challenges associated with the aging process, including memory problems, fatigue, trouble sleeping, confusion, depression, anxiety, and irritability. Specific signs of prescription medication abuse include mood changes, lack of energy and concentration, loss of short-term memory, and an overall loss of interest.

Substance abuse among seniors is a grave concern that worsens when the senior serves as a caregiver to a loved one. As a family member, you must keep tabs on your senior caregiver's mental state, know which medications she can access, and be aware of the signs and symptoms of substance abuse in seniors so you are prepared to assist her in seeking help before her health and the health of her care recipient are put at greater risk.

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