

## Sexual Healing

Let's face it. You can't run away from sex—unless you're running in the direction of a convent.

And while many women may feel like doing just that in recovery, it's better to put sex in context: as a part of the mix of feelings and factors that make up the whole person.

Kirkpatrick and other alcoholism counselors recommend that we start by learning about our own bodies and feelings. Books—like **Our Bodies, Ourselves** (by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective)—can help ease fears that sexual feelings are abnormal or strange.



We also need to learn what we like sexually.

"A woman should treat herself sensuously, take bubble baths, learn how to treat her body as if it is her lover," they advise. "Only then can she teach her lover how to please her."

Strange advice? Not really. Because just as there's more to alcoholism recovery than not drinking, there's more to sexuality than just sex.

And the woman who discovers that sex can be a bridge to intimacy, satisfaction, and a strong self-image is likely to find deeper, more honest relationships—sexual and otherwise—at the other end.

The man who finds such a woman may have little luck in bending her to his whims, but he'll be happier than the men who used to push her around. ☺



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# a woman's guide to Sex and Recovery



## Hang Ups

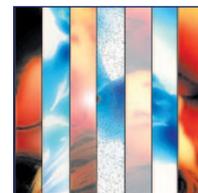
"I had one big fear when I was in treatment for my alcoholism," said Barbara, an attractive brunette in her late thirties.

"I dreaded going home and sleeping with my husband, Mike."

Don't get the wrong idea. It's not that Barbara disliked her husband. She loved him. But to Mike, sex was an important part of their marriage—in many ways the most important part. And he let Barbara know that he'd missed it while she was gone.

Barbara wasn't interested.

In fact, she planned to reject Mike's advances. "I detested the thought of having sex with him," she said.



*Positive-negative. Sexual currents run deep and can trigger deeply-felt conflicts.*

"For 12 years I'd taken care of his needs, burying my resentments in a bottle. Now that I was sober, I couldn't bear the thought of meeting his demands."

## Sex & Recovery

Is Barbara an icy oddball, a woman so warped by sexual hang ups that she'll never be able to carry on a loving relationship with a man? Is she different from other women struggling to recover from alcoholism?

Not according to Jean Kirkpatrick, author and founder of Women for Sobriety, a national self-help group for alcoholic women.

Thirty years ago, Kirkpatrick broke open the secret world of alcoholic women in **Turnabout**, a brutally honest diary of her own drinking days.

Through her recovery—and the stories told by Women for Sobriety members—Kirkpatrick discovered that sexuality is often the one of the rawest areas of a recovering woman's shredded self-esteem.

She believes that, for many women, drug and drinking problems are sexual problems in disguise.

That's what this pamphlet is all about.



*Deep currents. Sexual issues can loom large in recovery since sexuality itself often plays a major role in addictive processes.*

*Sexuality is often one of the rawest areas of a recovering woman's shredded self-esteem.*



In it, we'll explore many of the issues of love and sexuality that come up for women in recovery from alcoholism and other forms of chemical dependency.

We'll listen to women share their breakdowns and breakthroughs, and we'll suggest ways to rebuild relationships and renew self-esteem.

We hope you'll stay with us. Because sex plays a major role for many women who become chemically dependent. And to break its hold, it's necessary to understand its pull.

## Abuse & Intimacy

So what, exactly, does sex have to do with alcoholism and drug dependence?

A lot. That's because sexual fears and insecurities can be the engine that drives a woman's drinking or drug use. And many professionals point to early sexual abuse as the place where those anxieties begin.

In fact, experts now recognize childhood sexual abuse as a risk factor in all forms of drug dependence. Some estimate that as many as half of all female patients in treatment have been raped or abused, while a third are victims of incest.

And sexual abuse is particularly damaging to feelings of self-worth. Helen, a 37-year-old nurse who was abused by her stepfather, tells her story:

"Secretly, men terrified me," she admits, "but I learned young that a sweet smile and playing it passive protected me from male anger. So I went along with whatever my date wanted. My sexual escapades didn't bother me

when I was drinking, but I'd wake up with overwhelming feelings of guilt. And I'd drink more to numb my feelings."

Helen never learned to relate to men as friends and equals—or even as people. But like many abused women, she did learn that drinking could blot away the shame and insecurity—at least for a little while.

## Role Reversal

Sexual abuse is a major barrier to alcoholism recovery. Sexual stereotypes are another.

Because despite all the advances made by women in the past 20 years, gender roles are still alive and kicking in America today.

They're most visible at home, where women are still the primary care-givers, putting the needs of men and children ahead of their own. In the process, their own need for support and intimacy gets neglected—or forgotten.

But in treatment, a woman gets a different message: *You have to start taking care of your own needs. You have to put yourself first. Your recovery depends on it.*

It's a double-whammy that hits a recovering woman hard. Now preserving her sobriety—and her sanity—

involves more than merely reshaping the habits of her drug or drinking days. It requires transforming the attitudes of a lifetime.

Lois, who's been sober for three years, speaks from experience.

"My husband's needs always came before my own. I thought that was the way marriage was supposed to be. His job was to support me and my job was to make him happy.

"When I came out of treatment I felt like a complete failure, as a wife *and* as a woman. I couldn't see how my husband could love like me, much less love me. But I desperately wanted to be more than a warm body in bed beside him."

Lois threatened divorce before Jim agreed to counseling. Today he says it saved their marriage.

"At first, I thought the problem was entirely hers, but it was both of us," he recalls. "Our sex life still isn't all I'd like it to be, but we're working on it together. And sex is better when both people are enjoying it."



**Lasting legacy.** Childhood sexual abuse often leads to adult chemical dependency.

## Women Without Partners

Most treatment programs now recognize that it takes two to repair a relationship strained by years of chemical abuse. But what about women without partners? How do they deal with sex after sobriety?

Too often, by not talking about it.

Dana, a 30-year-old divorcee, completed a three-week stay at a well-known hospital. The program discussed sex briefly during one film, then ignored it for the rest of treatment.

"My counselor was a man," she says. "He was nice and we talked about other things, but you know how it is. And there were six men in my treatment group. I certainly wasn't going to talk about my most intimate secrets in front of them!"

But Dana *needed* to talk about her sex life. Avoiding it left her poorly prepared to cultivate relationships that didn't revolve around singles clubs and drinking. Within months she'd slipped from her hard-earned sobriety.

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Kirkpatrick argues that unless treatment addresses both dependency and sexuality, many recovering women risk relapse with every close romantic encounter.

The solution? Recovering women need to talk about their guilt and anger before they can heal. They need to learn to recognize the patterns of feeling that drive them to drink. Only then are they ready for new relationships—or rekindling an old romance.

## Recovering & Rebuilding

So how does a recovering woman begin?

Slowly. Kirkpatrick suggests that a woman in recovery concentrate on building her confidence and self-image before building up her sex life. And many women are better off waiting six months—or as long as a year—before beginning a new sexual relationship.

But what's a woman with an established sex partner supposed to do with him in the meantime? Ignore him? Fake it 'till she makes it?

Couples should focus first on sharing time and feelings together before jumping back into bed—and their old, unsettled sex life, says Kirkpatrick. And sex therapy is a good starting point.

Frank, a 40-year-old salesman shares his experience: "When my wife came out of treatment, I thought all our problems were over. But emotionally, she was still in a million pieces.

"It was a painful process for both of us. I'd always considered myself a skilled lover. It floored me when she said I was clumsy and selfish and she'd been faking her orgasms!

"I finally agreed to sex therapy. Now, after years of marriage, we've learned to communicate our needs to each other. It hasn't been easy, but it's been worth it."

## For Women Only...

**a**ll alcoholics are created equal. Some are just created faster than others. Women, for instance.

In fact, recent studies confirm just how wide the gender gap is when it comes to drinking.

Over the past few years researchers have identified the enzyme that protects men from getting too drunk, too fast. Women have less of it, so we get intoxicated quicker and stay that way longer.

We've also learned that alcohol hits women harder: We develop liver damage sooner and are more likely to die from it than male drinkers.

The gap goes for treatment, too, says Jean Kirkpatrick. She believes women feel more shame and guilt over their drinking and need extra help feeling good about themselves again. "Recovering women don't have an image of themselves as individuals," she explains. "They have no self-esteem, no self-value."

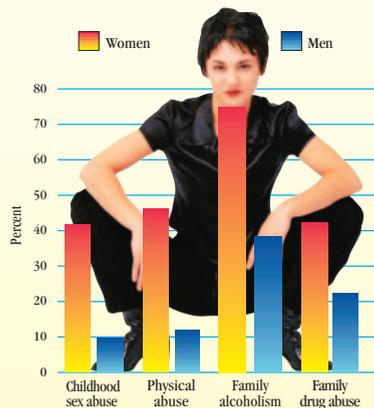
One solution is "women-only" support groups, like the Women for Sobriety program Kirkpatrick founded. The groups help women regain their confidence in a safe environment—a process Kirkpatrick believes is critical to full recovery.

Julie, a WFS member, agrees. "Treatment and AA meetings got me sober, but they didn't deal with the problems I have as a woman. When I'm with other women, I can really let my hair down. For the first time I don't feel like some terrible misfit."

For more information, contact: Women for Sobriety, Box 618, Quakertown, PA 18951, (215) 536-8026. ☎

## Gender Gap

Source: Chemical Abuse Treatment Outcome Registry



**All in the Family.** Women in treatment for alcohol and drug problems report more frequent—and more severe—early life problems than men.