

FOLLOWING THE recent surge in media attention on moms and substance abuse, questions are being raised as to the reasons behind this alarming phenomenon—and how to prevent similar incidents from occurring. Startling news stories of mothers abusing drugs or alcohol while caring for children and driving them to activities, or neglecting them while under the influence are becoming more and more frequent. Much of this media attention has put the spotlight on suburban moms and celebrities whose drug and alcohol use have made headline news.

Diane Schuler, a suburban mom from New York, was driving on the wrong side of the road with her children and three nieces while under the influence of alcohol and marijuana, resulting in a head-on collision that killed seven people in July 2009. Her youngest son was the only survivor.

Deborah Bradley, the Kansas City mother of a missing 10-month-old baby, admitted that she was drunk—having polished off a box of wine—on the October night of her daughter’s disappearance. Authorities note that on the evening in question, Bradley indicates she did not hear the baby monitor or dog barking, which would have alerted her to a possible intruder in her home.

Other prominent examples in the media include pop star Britney Spears, the mother of two young children, involved in a custody battle in part because of her alleged prescription drug and alcohol abuse. Actress Melissa Gilbert includes in her memoir that she was drinking up to three bottles of wine a night, until her eight-year-old son begged her to stop. These and many more tragic stories are being reported at an alarming rate.

American life has become fully infiltrated by addiction, as an increasing number of women—especially moms—turn to alcohol, pills, and other substances for stress relief. According to studies, the number of women aged 30-44 years abusing alcohol has doubled over the last 10 years. Specialists are looking into the physical and psychological factors affecting these women, and what this means for more American moms facing similar issues. In my professional experience, physical and psychological “overload” seems to be what most are enduring. Mothers’ overly busy schedules sometimes result in them turning to stimulants to keep them going throughout the day. Stimulants also are being used to address the pressures of “keeping their figures,” by artificially curbing appetites—at great cost to women’s nervous systems and overall health.

On an emotional level, moms often build internal resentment for putting their own activities aside, yet also experience feelings of guilt when they do not sacrifice their own needs for those of their family. Other times, lack of adult company leaves some mothers feeling lonely and depressed. All of these stressors lead to the temptation to use substances to numb these ill feelings. There are many expectations on mothers to address everyone’s needs, including their kids, husband, community, and work. Often they do not have any time or energy for themselves.

Another aspect specifically affecting women

Mother's Little Helpers

BY GAYLE MADELEINE RANDALL

“Modern mothers face more stress, family obligations, and professional responsibility than ever before.”

is the chemical imbalances that occur within their bodies during substance abuse, which often are magnified by the female’s natural hormonal fluctuations.

One treatment is to measure neurotransmitter levels, which have a profound effect on how a

woman feels, and thus play a critical role in influencing how she behaves. Neurotransmitters are the chemical messengers that allow nerves to talk to each other. They are necessary for the body’s organs, muscles, and brain to function effectively.

Estrogen and progesterone levels plummet when a woman is premenstrual, post-partum, or approaching menopause, which decreases transmission of the calming, or inhibitory, chemical messages—and removes a mom’s natural buffers to stress. This may be another trigger for her to reach for alcohol or drugs to self-medicate.

Inside the body, drugs and alcohol resemble our natural neurotransmitters (NTs), and they trigger the body to release more NTs artificially. Because of this, neurotransmitter levels are highly elevated during drug and alcohol intoxication. This is what leads to a sense of euphoria and reduced anxiety—but only temporarily.

As the body senses and reacts to the heightened levels of these NTs inside its system, the body tries to protect itself by reducing its own natural production of NTs. As a result, more and more of the substance must be taken to achieve the same effect, leading to addictive use, and sometimes causing permanent nerve damage.

Neurotransmitters almost always are imbalanced when a person is abusing substances like drugs or alcohol. A woman who is feeling the effects of imbalanced, fluctuating NTs (but without realizing the cause) may turn to drugs or alcohol to self-medicate. This temporary “fix” works at first, but the ongoing abuse only worsens the chemical NT depletion over time.

In my time as a physician, I have seen an increasing number of mothers who use substances ranging from narcotics to alcohol, benzodiazepine such as Valium and Xanax, cocaine, and other stimulants. One of the most dramatic examples of a drug dependent mom with NT depletion was a 36-year-old woman who came to us after six years of snorted opiate abuse. She pleaded with me, “I don’t want to do this anymore. Please help me stop. I have kids; they need me.” In this case, measurements of her

Tips for Moms to Stay Healthy

There are a number of alternatives for overwhelmed and struggling mothers to drugs and alcohol, including:

Practice deep breathing. It has been proven that five to 10 minutes of yoga-type breathing from the belly can calm the nervous system and provide up to six hours of reduced stress, exhibited by lower heart rate and blood pressure, slower brain waves, higher endorphin and neurotransmitter levels, and an increased sense of well-being.

Exercise. One hour of daily exercise is ideal, but even light to moderate exercise has enormous health benefits on all of the body’s systems.

Maintain a healthy balanced diet. Limit or eliminate caffeine, tobacco, and stimulants (energy drinks) and hydrate, which helps provide more stamina and energy to handle the demands of life as a parent.

Drink plenty of water. Shoot for a goal of half your weight in ounces. So, a 150-pound woman should drink 75 ounces a day.

Learn to say “No.” Oftentimes, pleasing others takes precedence over caring for oneself. This especially is true with moms.

Get adequate sleep. Aim for consistently getting seven to eight hours per night. Finding more time for sleep always is a challenge, but is necessary for the body to function effectively—physically and psychologically.



neurotransmitter levels revealed miserably low readings of virtually all neurochemicals tested.

This particular mom was treated with natural targeted amino acid and nutrient therapy. She also received a full-treatment approach with psychotherapy, family therapy, and 16 other modalities. She required 90 days of rehabilitation, a not-unusual time frame given the severe situation. At present, she is functioning as a mom, back to work and with her family and children, living a productive life.

Drug abuse in high doses for a long duration of time causes a “burnout” phenomenon, with depletion of all neurotransmitters, which tend to stay at that lower level until the body is reminded to produce them again. After detoxing from the drugs, neurotransmitters can be rebalanced with targeted amino acid and vitamin therapies. This can result in a better recovery, manifesting as improved sleep, increased feeling of well-being, more energy, and decreased anxiety and cravings.

In my practice, I always recommend having a woman’s neurotransmitter levels evaluated after detoxing, and that she receives appropriate therapy from a practitioner who understands this field. When patients are given selective amino acids and other herbal and vitamin building-block precursors, they can replenish their neurochemical pools and feel better naturally. I remind my patients, “Every ‘body’ has its own innate ability to balance itself.”

Our immunity, neurochemistry, and metabolism have self-righting mechanisms that are encoded within our genetics. Despite the tremendous negative effects substance abuse and unhealthy lifestyles have on the body and its systems, the body can, and will, heal itself. With detoxification and a program of natural vitamin, mineral, and neurosupportive therapies, combined with the crucial help of therapists, drug dependent moms can heal and achieve balance of mind, body, and spirit.

A mother of two adolescent children came to

us for alcohol dependency and stayed 30 days. She was a divorcee with a new fiancé and had every reason in the world to be happy; she was well-off, attractive, and in love. Over the last year, however, the stress and expectations of motherhood and those of her new relationship caused an increase in her alcohol consumption. She felt pressured to remain young and vital for her boyfriend and perfectly available for her children; she crumpled under the stress.

During rehab, she dug deep into her triggers with her therapists and realized that despite her fiancé’s unwavering support, it was his tendency to parent her that caused her to rebel and drink

more. Family therapy with her fiancé and children, along with stress management, were very helpful, while her NT and nutritional chemical imbalances also were addressed. She did well and remains sober today.

Another young woman with an infant daughter came to us after succumbing to injectable opiate abuse. After the birth of her baby, the pressure of caring for an infant, being a good wife, and working regularly were more than she could handle. She began using opiates to allow her to do what she needed to without feeling anxiety and stress.

After her initial detox, treatment involved intensive psychotherapy, family therapy, exercise, stress management, and spiritual guidance. She needed 90 days to acquire the skills to remain sober and manage the stress of life. Her main underlying issue was the fear of being inadequate. Her mother had ingrained this sense of feeling “less than” from a young age.

Early trauma often is an underlying cause in substance abuse and surfaces during times of extreme stress. Recognizing her underlying root cause and addressing it with family therapy and psychotherapy was liberating for this young mother. She returned home with a new sense of parenting and purpose.

Modern mothers face more stress, family obligations and professional responsibility than ever before. These factors, along with a woman’s unique body chemistry and natural hormonal fluctuations, can leave them vulnerable to substance abuse and addiction. By finding the time to nurture themselves, and with the support of family and professional therapists, moms can stay healthy and energized to take on the challenges they face every day. ★

Gayle Madeleine Randall is director of the Randall Wellness Center, Woodland Hills, Calif., and head consulting physician for Passages Malibu (Calif.) Alcohol and Addiction Center.

Warning Signs of Substance Abuse

If you—or someone you love—is struggling with substance abuse, look for warning signs and, if necessary, seek treatment from licensed professionals. There are a number of indicators that may become evident, including:

- Behavior changes such as missing appointments, not keeping up with personal hygiene or household chores, and uncharacteristically messy and dirty cars and homes.
- Absenteeism—people who abuse drugs isolate and begin to miss appointments and not show up where they used to, avoid groups, and do not engage in conversations and activities.
- Physical changes such as tremors, dark circles under the eyes, stained teeth, and weight loss or gain.
- Infections of the skin or acne, which can result from chemical imbalances and declining personal hygiene.
- Rapid pressured speech or slurring and not engaging in conversation.