

Media release: New UWS study to shed light on women and recovery from alcoholism

Australian women aged between 26 and 60 years who have recovered from a drinking problem are being asked to take part in a University of Western Sydney study that could lead to better understanding and treatment of the disease.

PhD candidate Ms Janice Withnall, from the UWS School of Education, is carrying out the project in a bid to better understand the experiences of women who have successfully stopped drinking.

National statistics show that alcohol-related illness hospitalises 95,000 Australians a year. Of that group, 7 per cent are women who are alcohol dependent.

However, Ms Withnall says the numbers of midlife women aged 35 to 55 years who are living with the painful flow-on effects from their own alcohol misuse - like health problems, damage to self-esteem, and impact on career, business and family - is increasing. The figure may be as high as 13 per cent, according to the 2005 Australian Longitudinal Study of Womens Health and the Australian Bureau of Statistics health data.

"Women progress from alcohol use to alcoholism more rapidly than men in a process of acceleration known as 'telescoping.' Research has shown that alcoholism is becoming the third leading cause of death in women aged 35 to 55," Ms Withnall says.

"There is little research internationally that specifically looks at midlife women and their experiences with alcohol, the negative impact it can have on their lives, families and communities. Likewise, little is understood of midlife women in sober recovery in Australia."

While we don't know all the reasons why these women appear to be more at risk compared to other age groups, there are some clues, according to Ms Withnall.

"This group of women is what we call the 'sandwich generation' - they face different pressures from different directions. These are women who may have childcare responsibilities, or look after elderly parents, on top of also experiencing their own relationship and career pressures," she says.

"We hope to shed more light on the recovery issue, increase our knowledge, and improve care and support for Australian women to achieve long and satisfying lives."

Professionals who focus on alcohol and drug harm and have helped women to maintain sobriety are also being asked to take part in the study, which will be in the form of a survey and interviews.

The study is designed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality, and has been approved by the UWS Ethics Committee. If you are interested in participating, contact Janice Withnall on (02) 4570 1194 or by email at 94302279@studentmail.uws.edu.au.

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