



GREY MATTERS:

Preventing and responding to alcohol and other drug problems among older Australians

Information Sheet 5



Barriers and enablers to accessing assistance

Roger Nicholas | Ann M Roche

An important part of healthy ageing is ensuring low risk alcohol and drug use. Factors which may act as barriers to older people obtaining early/brief intervention or more intensive treatment include:

- Not being screened for problems
- The characteristics of individuals concerned
- Issues related to health and welfare professionals
- Practical issues.

Barriers Related to Screening

Older people are not commonly screened for substance use problems. This hampers intervention opportunities.

Existing screening processes are also not well suited to detect problems among older people (see *Information Sheet 4: Prevention and Screening Programs*).

Barriers Related to Individual Characteristics

Older people may be reluctant to ask for help. They may feel embarrassed, or that they shouldn't need support.

Longer-term users of specialist services may also be reluctant to re-engage in treatment as a result of perceptions that they have 'failed'. Some may also think that it is too late to change (mirroring the views of some professionals).¹

Other factors which may act as barriers to help-seeking include:

- Relying on self-diagnosis
- Attributing symptoms to the ageing process
- Cognitive problems, such as substance-induced memory loss or underlying dementia
- Unwillingness to disclose problems
- Collusion of family members
- A desire to continue using.^{1,2}

Barriers Related to Health and Welfare Professionals

Knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of health and welfare professionals can act as barriers to older people seeking help. This can include:

- Ageism, negative stereotypes and attributing problems to the ageing process
- A lack of awareness of substance use problems among older people
- A reluctance to ask embarrassing or sensitive questions of older people
- A view that older people are too old to change their behaviour
- A lack of confidence in their skills to take action
- A belief that it is wrong to 'deprive' older people of their 'last pleasure in life'
- An inability to identify signs and symptoms of problems in older people.^{1,3}

Practical Barriers

Transport, mobility, language or hearing difficulties may limit older peoples' access to services, especially those who are frail, homebound or in rural or poorer urban communities.

Being socially isolated can result in serious problems going undetected. Some people may simply not know where to turn for help, and help that is available may not be well advertised.

Time constraints can also be a barrier: older people may have to care for a spouse, relative, friend or grandchildren.³

Mixed-age clinical services may not be a comfortable or welcoming environment. Some may find younger users 'hectic', 'chaotic', or intimidating.¹

Enabling Factors

Older people with substance misuse problems are not a homogenous group. Most are unlikely to need specialist services. Primary care providers, mental health services, social care providers and residential services are pivotal in accessing effective interventions.

Essential options include one-to-one support, counselling and groupwork. The latter can also help address loneliness and isolation, a common underlying cause of substance use problems.¹

Alcohol and other drug programs for older people should:

- Be age-specific, supportive, non-confrontational, aim to build self-esteem and create a culture of respect
- Address depression, loneliness, and loss (e.g., death of a spouse, retirement) and rebuilding social support networks
- Be flexible and conducted at an appropriate pace
- Involve families and carers
- Involve staff members who are interested and experienced in working with older adults
- Involve case management and create linkages with medical, ageing and referral services
- Take a broad, holistic approach to treatment incorporating age-specific psychological, social, and health problems.⁴

The provision of appropriate prevention and treatment services will play an increasingly important role in the healthy ageing of Australians. To do so requires identifying and responding to factors which enable or act as barriers to older people accessing these services.

This information sheet is from the *Grey Matters Information Sheet Series* developed by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, Flinders University to reduce alcohol- and other drug-related harm among Australians aged 55 and over.

This Information Sheet and other resources on alcohol and drugs and older people can be located at: <http://nceta.flinders.edu.au/index.php?cID=590>



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