

Autism Spectrum Disorders & Alcohol Abuse



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UWLEND



Disclosures

The logo for UW Medicine is centered on the slide. It features the text "UW Medicine" in a large, black, serif font. Below this text is a thin horizontal line. Underneath the line, the words "UW SCHOOL OF MEDICINE" are written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font, arranged in two lines. The entire logo is framed by a thick, dark grey L-shaped border that starts on the left and ends on the bottom.

UW Medicine

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Today's speaker has no financial relationships relevant to this presentation to disclose.

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Prevalence

- Several studies that I read in the creation of this didactic were not credible enough to pin down the prevalence of this issue amongst the ASD community.

ASD & Increased Risk Factors For Alcohol Abuse

- What we do know is that individuals with ASD are more likely to meet risk factors associated with alcohol abuse.
 - Having a biological family member with alcoholism or substance abuse.
 - Having co-occurring Behavior Health Tx
 - Stress co-mingled with everyday autism challenges, i.e., interaction with peers/co-workers
- My downward spiral with alcohol started when I lost my best friend to SUDEP. This individual was my entire world when she passed. I almost quit the field entirely.

Identifying Issues

- As an autistic I was a high functioning alcoholic most people had no idea I struggled with Alcohol Abuse.
- Signs Family Friends and Medical Teams Should Look for.
 - Increased irritability 0-60
 - Lack of focus / Tired all the time
 - Changes in physical appearance effort
 - Financial Problems – During my year clean I saved so much money...

Starting the Conversation

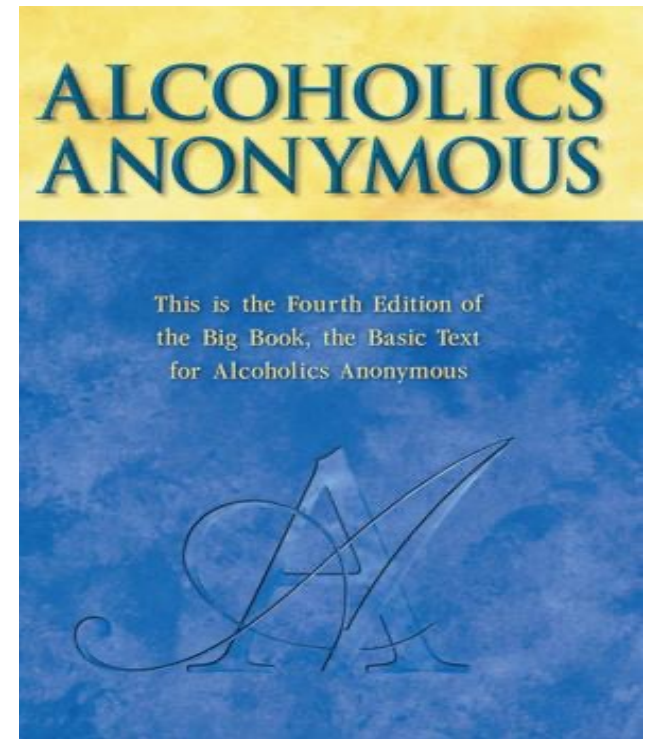
- Tread lightly. Alcoholism is an embarrassing topic for many who struggle with it.
- For an individual on the spectrum bombarding them with a family style intervention is not the best way to handle the conversation.
- Come from a place of genuine concern. Be with the individual through the struggle, and offer resources as appropriate.
- Ultimatums rarely work.

What About the RX Situation

- Not only do you need to worry about the individual and their alcohol abuse but how mixing certain medications with alcohol can be problematic.
- At my height, I was mixing 2-4 24 packs a week on top of 200 mg of trazodone, 20mg of lexapro, 10mg of buspar medicine that shouldn't have had any alcohol mixed with it.
- When I started my clean year I asked my psychologist for naltrexone. There was some argument amongst my family that I was easily able to access the medication. I took it for two months.
- What I liked about this medicine is that I was told that if I drank alcohol while having it in my system, I would get very sick.

Support: AA Is Not Accessible

- AA requires a lot of reading (not in plain language) after a year I didn't complete the readings
- The Big Book and Daily Reflections
- I was very lucky to have a female sponsor who was an educator and had an idea of how to work with people with developmental disabilities.
- AA is very rigid (once an alcoholic always an alcoholic)



Level of Support

- As an autistic I feel I benefited from attending AA meetings hearing how others were successful only fueled my wanting to get clean.
- AA is not for everyone I've still yet to find an AA group just for those who are neurodiverse.
- Talk therapy was very helpful for me.

Treatment Ideas

- 1-1 talk therapy (specifically with someone who has experience with I/DD)
- Applied Behavior Analysis
- Rehab

There is a way back!

- January 2021, I broke my clean date I went to a work mixer had one beer, and didn't want another one afterward.
- I still keep my AA chips in my wallet, so I have to see them when I go for my ID.
- As soon as I got clean my life changed, I got two promotions at work, met and started dating.

Its About Changing Relationship To Alcohol

- The best thing I did was to understand that my relationship to alcohol needed to change.
- Therapy taught me that I was drinking for all the wrong reasons: Daily autism stress, job pressure, to dull emotional pain.
- Now my relationship to alcohol consists of social drinking in moderation.
- Knowing I still struggle socially I am very weary about when and where I chose to drink especially with co-workers.
- Helping individuals understand that are drinking for the wrong reasons is the first to step to dealing with the issue head on.