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Pressure to be The Perfect Wife; could this be the reason why so many women are alcohol dependent?

With over 1 in 10 women admitting that they drink nearly double the recommended units a week (26 units, rather than the recommended 14), we have to question why so many women are reaching for the bottle and look at the reasons behind this growing trend of chemical and alcohol dependency in women.

Leading rehabilitation centre The Cabin Chiang Mai have identified that a strong percentage of their female clients, have put this down to the pressure of living up to an ideal, to some trying to be "The Perfect Wife" has led to their alcohol dependence. It is reported that at least 29 out of every 1,000 women are currently dependent on alcohol.

Anna Francis*, a client at the The Cabin has been married for 16 years, during this time she was heavily dependent on alcohol and painkillers and after 15 years of marriage her husband begged her to go into rehab before their marriage and family fell apart. She says:

"It has been a long slide into addiction. It started with depression - I felt I had lost the direction and meaning of my life. I was also unhappy with the fact that my husband was constantly away on business, was tired when he got home, disinterested in the kids etc. Instead of picking fights with him, I buried my resentments and my loneliness and simply drank, quietly and mostly on my own. I found excuses to open a bottle earlier in the day. I also discovered the "wonderfully soothing effects" of using painkillers. At first they were prescribed by my doctor for lower back pain, but I soon discovered that if I doubled the dose, it was even more "soothing". So I started going to multiple doctors to get the quantities I needed. It was becoming an expensive habit.

My husband has a successful business and I wanted to keep up the image of being "The Perfect Wife". During this time, my husband's young cousin, John moved in with us on a temporary basis and in retrospect, he took over quite a few roles of my frequently absent husband. The situation was, however, a ticking time-bomb. I knew that John was becoming attracted to me but I did nothing to discourage him. He was very good for my flagging ego, my sense of self-worth as a woman and in my twisted mind, helped to stave off the horrid stereotype of "a desperate housewife". And so I played up the MILF factor, thriving on the chemistry that was simmering between us. The path to destruction is also paved with vanity and wine. I allowed my vanity to lead the way and on John's birthday, I made sure the kids were away at sleepovers, plied him with wine and seduced him. The next day, he was so mortified by what we had done that he moved out. I was left alone with the shame and enormity of what I had done. Feelings of rejection, failure were mixed up with humiliation, guilt and an overwhelming urge to...just drink.

My husband and children started to notice the cracks in my "performance". I would miss events at school, or forget about meetings with teachers. At business dinners,

my husband's partners exchanged looks as I downed yet more red wine. Trips to the supermarket became erratic. I lost interest in making meals, my children became more familiar with TV dinners and fast food. I saw less and less of my women friends. They seem to have perfect marriages and I could not bear to compare my life with theirs. I fired the housekeeper when she expressed concerns about my drinking. Numbing myself with alcohol and pills became my primary obsession, and I made sure to dispose of the empty bottles myself".

For this lady, she had to learn to control her addictions and address the problems within her marriage and the underlying psychological causes of her addictions. After 2 months in rehab and away from her normal environment, she had the time and space to reflect on her life, face personal demons and stop making excuses for her actions.

Cait Saul, Senior Counsellor at The Cabin says, "This case shows, that having spent so much time being a "Trophy Wife", Anna had neglected her own emotional development and failed to develop coping skills. It has become clear in the field of addiction treatment that there is a growing trend of chemical and alcohol dependency in women. Over the past 10 years, treatment options and facilities are catching up to meet the needs of these women. Through these services, I am now seeing a greater social acceptance of women getting treatment. At The Cabin, we have treatment programmes tailored to the specific needs of these women."

Editor's Notes:

- Anna Francis is an anonymous case study.
- Cait Saul is a qualified professional counsellor with over 8 years experience with alcohol and drug rehabilitation counselling. Cait's professional experience includes being a family services advocate and serving as chairperson on numerous recovery committees as well as annual women's retreats.
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