

Problems Facing Families with Substance Abusers: A Review Study

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Abstract

Background and objectives: Given its progressive nature in all life aspects, drug abuse threatens the health of individuals, families, and society and causes some economic, political and human damages to each society. In this regard, family is the first variable exposed to such a threat. Accordingly, the present study was to review the problems facing families of substance abusers.

Methods: In this study, the Scopus, Medline, SID, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Science Direct databases were surfed using keywords such as problems, substance abuse, addiction, family during 2000 to 2017. Finally, 30 full-text articles were selected.

Results: Studies have revealed that drug-related disorders affect the family system and members and bring family members different problems, including psychosocial, economic, physical, family and educational problems. These studies reported the psychological problems of family members as the most frequent one.

Conclusion: The present study indicated that family members with substance abusers face different problems in different aspects of their life; therefore, the need to expand prevention and treatment programs for such persons seems to be urgent.

Keywords: Substance abuse; Addiction; Family

Introduction

The family is considered to be the most fundamental social unit creating the most intimate interpersonal relations and interactions, and no other social unit in society is equivalent to this unit in terms of significance and impact (1). Two basic functions of this unit are to establish socialization and stability for individuals (2)

Family has also been examined from two perspectives: (1) family structure and function; (2) relational changes and transformations caused by family and non-family factors. Family function is a set of family members' tasks, roles, and expectations from each other. Hence family plays a critical role in specifying roles and responsibilities of its members, causing an understanding of the assigned roles, fairness and reasonableness of roles and duties, and planning power to perform tasks, explaining roles and boundaries for its members, setting regulations to establish family order, protecting members in times of crisis, and providing explicit communication, mutual trust, and accountability (3, 4).

Family therapy advocates treat family members as dependent systems that coexist and form a unit. Therefore, changes in a part of system for one or more family members can lead to family disruption and make the entire system face some difficulties. One of the factors that affect the family's functions and dynamics is addiction in families, which increases family members' problems (5). No phenomenon has ever threatened human societies as addiction has. Despite the dangers and complications of addiction, the number of its victims is increasing progressively (6).

Substance dependence and abuse are one of the most important problems of the present era at a global scale. Nowadays, four percent of the world population is addicted to a variety of drugs (7), and the World Health Organization's annual report in 2005 showed that there were about 200 million opiate addicts in the world, and that millions of dollars were annually spent to fight against substance production and distribution or to treat the addicts (8). Iran is among the countries with the highest proportion of substance users per capita as the number of substance users in this country varies from 2 million to 4 million persons. The research deputy of the Institute of Addiction Research at Tehran University of Medical Sciences reported 3.5 million substance users and more than 1.5 million addicts in Iran. Furthermore, the deputy director of the Prevention Center in Iran's Welfare Organization announced that the addiction growth in Iran was three times as much as population growth. In Iran, the addiction growth is about 8 percent annually, while the annual population growth is about 2.1 percent; hence, the number of addicts grows 3 times as much as the population growth (9).

Addiction is considered to be a physical, mental, and psychological illness that threatens the health of the individuals, families, and society due to its nature progressing in all life aspects. The addiction is also associated with economic, political and human problems for each society (10). Family is the first system being affected by this event, and this can have a devastating effect on the family members (11). In a family system, the negative effects of substance abuse is directly on the addict's spouse, parents, and children. Substance abuse can have adverse effects on family processes and systems, including

religious rituals, family's exclusive laws and regulations, everyday household tasks, and family and social structures and systems. In this case, the family members suffer from psychological and social stress and such a condition would affect their physical and mental health and lead to problems for substance users and other family members (12). This may include economic, legal, emotional distress and, sometimes, violence (13).

Considering the impact of drug abuse disorder on families can be of importance since the profile of its relevant factors can have an impact on its consequences and might be helpful in designing and planning interventions to help families in dealing with drug dependence (14). Accordingly, the present study entitled "Problems Facing Families with Substance Abusers: A Review Study" was conducted in order to address the problems of these individuals according to different studies and provide a general description of the problems of families with substance users.

Materials and Methods

This research was a review study. The Scopus, Medline, SID, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Science Direct databases were surfed to find full text articles on the problems of family members of the substance users. The articles were published during 2000 to 2017 in English and Persian and contained keywords such as problems, substance abuse, addiction, and family. Almost 147 articles were found and irrelevant and non-full text articles were then removed. This resulted in the selection and review of 30 articles (14 articles in English and 16 articles in Persian).

Results

An analysis of the studies conducted in Iran and other countries on the problems of families with substance users indicated that substance abuse disorders affect the family system and members and cause problems for family members in various psychosocial, economic, physical, educational, and family dimensions.

Psychosocial problems:

Long-term substance use (i.e., addiction) not only affects the user or the addict but also poses destructive and harmful effects on psychological burden of the family (15). Family members may feel angry, frustrated, anxious, fear full, stressed, depression, shame, guilty, or shy (16 & 17). Moriarty et al. showed that addiction had psychosocial and social effects on families in New Zealand, including low self-esteem, social and behavioral isolation, social problems, and feelings of fear and anxiety (18).

Negative effects of parents' substance abuse disorders in families encompasses disorders in the sense of belonging (attachment), customs, roles, relationships, and social life. Families in which parents have substance abuse disorder are characterized by feelings of deficiency, conflict, violence, misbehavior, emotional chaos, role reversal, and fear. Negative Consequences of a parent or both parents being substance abusers covers a range of hidden harms, and these consequences sometimes are revealed when children or adolescents are reluctant face problems in having trustful communication with other people, and when they are in charge of adult prior to their evolutionary maturity. This happens when their guardians are unable to meet their evolutionary needs,

and the children begin to do their parents' tasks, which is called the "reversal of dependence needs" (13).

Two other studies also showed that there was a significant difference between the psychosocial problems of adolescents in addicted and non-addicted families (19&20), and that the feelings of depression and stress, hostility and violent tendencies, experience of persecution and negligence were significantly observed in women with addicted husbands (21). Salehi et al. also found that a significant difference for psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, aggression, paranoid, and depression in families with addicted and non-addicted members (22).

Financial problems:

Substance abuse is a chronic and reversible disorder that imposes high costs on individuals, families, and community; however, no definitive treatment has yet been found for this disorder. Even when the dependent person quits substance consumption for a long time, he is not expected to complete the treatment course and not to re-consume drugs as this disease has a chronic and recurrent nature (15).

In families with an addict father, the economic function of the family is disrupted. Instead of providing the daily needs of the family, the father even takes the furniture for sale so that the supervision over his behavior becomes narrower. This in turn disturbs the basic needs of family members, both materially and intellectually, as well as their physical convenience and social communication; therefore, the father loses his authority in the family. Consequently, his wife and children, not on their own wish but by force, are to provide family livelihood (23).

Choudhary (2016) suggested that family members of the addict are exposed to financial burdens, and that most of these members expressed financial constraints and felt embarrassed to take credit from others to meet their financial needs (17).

Physical problems:

Substances abuse leads to conflicts in families, followed by feelings of stress affecting the family members, which are intense and long-lasting. Such stress can cause physical problems such as high blood pressure, ulcer, and angina (24).

Other studies have shown that family members of drug users have more physical problems, and medical costs are rising in such families, compared to the ones without a member who consumes substances (25). The family members of the addict experience negative physical problems such as musculoskeletal and sleep disorders (17). The results have indicated that the health care burden is high in these families and the health care services are used by these families four times as much as the non-affected families (26).

Family problems:

The presence of a substance user in the family affects other family members and significantly leads to family disintegration and disruption. An addict threatens the family structure because of the existence and realization of disorders in his individual, family and social roles (27). This affects the family dynamics and functions, which may increase the family's diseases and behavioral problems (25). In this regard, the family functions in aspects related to communication and emotion expression and

control is different in families with and without substance abusers (28).

The unpleasant evidence of emotional isolations, divorces, and family core disintegration are common side-effects of this event. The structure of the disadvantaged families, including families of the addict, the lack of proper communication between couples, chaos, and conflicts among family members are noticeable. Negative relations reduce the use of problem-solving skills, such as open discussion and encouragement, and the family degrades in functional terms; therefore, the descending performance of the family would lead to the family center collapse and dissolution (29).

Educational problems:

Educational problems are also another problem posed by addict parents. At an early age, parents are less likely to study and less likely to stimulate their children and toddlers' studies. At the school age, these parents are less likely to be able to help their children do their homework, and monitor and track their progress (13).

The household head's addiction makes the children's minds obsessed and discourage them from engaging in lessons. The results of the studies show that children with the addicted parents have more educational problems than their other counterparts since their family condition do not make them ready for their lessons and education, and they are in difficulty in terms of academic satisfaction and communication with the school (20).

Discussion

A review of some studies (e.g., Motamedi, et al., 2010, Mancheri et al., 2013, Lander et al.

2013, Keshavarz et al., 2014, Daley, 2013, Choudhary, 2016, Moriarty et al., 2011, and Dalvandi et al., 2001) revealed that members of households with substance users suffer from psychosocial problems since when a family member begins to change his behavior, this change affects the whole family system. This means that the family system acts as a unit, because when one part of the system changes, it affects all parts of the system in different ways and each part of the system tries to maintain the balance.

Moreover, when a family member begins to change habits, practices, interactions, the other family members get concerned subconsciously. In addition, family members are often negatively affected by the life style of the addict, and they, without awareness of what is happening, have feelings of harm, anger, frustration, and confusion. They are worried about the person they love, about why he is acting differently and why he is not performing his tasks well. This arouses tension in the family and, finally, leads to anxiety and depression among the family members (11). Furthermore, in response to signs and symptoms of illness and continuous care of the patient in order to prevent the addict's returning to the substance use, these family members, in addition to being stuck in feelings of grief, loss, sadness, anger, violence, despair, hopelessness, shame, and guilty, experience lots of communication extensions and pressures (15).

Because of the stigma attached to substance abuse, the problems are often hidden in the family, which not only worsens the experience of tension in families, but also deprives the family from helps and supports which can be received to treat the addict. The presence of an addict in the family affects the various family aspects and makes the

members of the addict's family experience a feeling of failure and negative emotions. On the other hand, these families try to adapt to problems through denial and aggression strategies (30).

Findings from the studies by Keshavarz (2014) (15), Daley (2013) (16), Choudhary (2016) (17), Agha Bakhshi (2009) (23), Mohammadifar *et al.* (2010) (29), Schafer (2011) (31) suggest that households of substance users also face economic problems. Given the fact that, in families with an addict father, the mother is to deal with financial and family affairs, in addition to housekeeping and childcare, these families face financial problems (29, 32). The economic burden imposed on households might also be caused by the money paid for substance, or by monetary problems associated with job loss. (16). Substance abuse imposes a lot of costs on the substance abuser, his family, and the society, which include direct costs such as hospital fees and compensation, and indirect costs, including lost production resulting from premature death and disease, job loss, and increased unemployment, and money spent on drugs, financial problems associated with job loss, or dependence on public assistance (16).

Choudhary (2016) (17), Ray *et al.* (2008) (25), and Lee *et al.* (2011) (26) claim that members of households with a substance user also suffer from physical problems. This could be due to the fact that living with a person who is a substance user is stressful and that the substance abuser often takes actions that might have an adverse effect on his family members' life (33). This causes chronic stresses for the family members, and such a tension is manifested as physical problems in the family, resulting in increased health-care burdens (26).

The findings of the studies by Ray *et al.* (2007), Raheb *et al.* (2010), Aman Elahi *et al.* (2013), and Schafer (2011) (31) indicate family problems in families with a substance abuser. This encompasses the family instability and disintegration following divorce in such families (16).

Lander *et al.* (2013) and Dalvandi *et al.* (2001) (20) demonstrated educational problems of children of addict parents. The factors that might affect children's education include increased anxiety levels caused by the chaotic home environment, as well as the failure to meet the necessary needs of these children, leading to reduced attention and concentration among these students. In addition to such problems in these families, the relationship between parents and teachers is also weak.

Considering the problems in the families with a substance user, a preventive and therapeutic intervention program aimed at reducing the complications of living with the addict in families and supporting the families of the addict is recommended to be developed.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

None

Authors' contributions

Equal contribution

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