



SUBSTANCE USE AND OLDER ADULTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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The Substance Use and Older Adults Resource Review for Teaching is intended to assist faculty teaching courses in Alcohol and other Drug Abuse (AODA) in schools of Social Work. The review focuses on older adults and substance abuse topics of prevalence, screening and assessment, treatment and intervention, and prevention. The content level assumes instructors have specific knowledge and are familiar with the general literature on alcohol and other drug abuse. Since the majority of research and teaching in AODA is with younger populations, instructors may not be familiar with the relevant information pertaining to substance use, abuse, and dependence among older adults. With the expected increase in the older populations in the coming decades, there is a need for teaching tools that address the knowledge gaps and prevailing assumptions about use of alcohol and other drugs among older populations. Students entering AODA social work practice need information and skills to address the AODA needs of older adults, but most social work students do not receive this preparation. This review provides useful information on AODA social work practice with older adults for classroom and field setting instruction.

Organization of Research and Curricula Review

This review provides a synopsis of recent research literature and key curriculum resources in six areas:

- 1) Chapter 2: Prevalence of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use and substance related problems among older adults.
- 2) Chapter 3: Strengths and vulnerabilities associated with older age and substance use.
- 3) Chapter 4: Detection of substance use, misuse, abuse and dependence among older adults.
- 4) Chapter 5: Treatment and intervention.
- 5) Chapter 6: Policy issues.
- 6) Chapter 7: Research questions and future research directions.

In this Review, we assess and describe recent empirical literature, curricula, and teaching resources such as DVDs and web sites. Our goal in this resource review is to provide social work faculty with current and empirically based information on substance use, misuse, abuse, and dependence among older adults. The primary focus is to develop content about older adults that can be added AODA classes within schools of social work. The research and curricula assessments are constructed so that instructors may use each Chapter independently or in combination to increase the content on older adults available to their students. To facilitate the use of separate Chapters of the review, we used planned repetition of information. Each Chapter includes 1) an overview of recent, empirically-based literature, 2) a list of references associated with the section, and 3) a brief list of key readings, web sites, and user-friendly instructional materials that may be adopted or adapted by instructors for their own courses. This review builds on the advances in knowledge over the past 10 years as well as curricula developed in the separate areas of alcohol abuse and medication management among older adults. The resource review is not another curriculum in alcohol and other drug use/abuse and older people. Instead, it critically reviews available curricula in substance use and abuse among older people in order to provide a guide for faculty who are interested in adding content on older adults to their AODA courses.

One advantage of this resource review is that it covers a range of substances: alcohol, tobacco, prescription drugs, and illicit drugs. The review is divided into Chapters that fit closely with direct practice social work knowledge and tasks. These core tasks apply across practice settings, reflecting that fact that social workers practice in a variety of service delivery systems and organizational contexts. The review includes information useful for those working within an array of social work roles—clinician, educator, advocate—requiring knowledge and skills related to alcohol and other drug abuse.

The goal of the resource review is to provide information and knowledge that can be used to increase social work practice skills in working with the full and diverse range of older adults who use or abuse alcohol, tobacco, prescription medications, or illicit drugs. Consistent with social work values, the review includes information on the following diversity issues: race/ethnicity, gender, social class and sexual orientation, as available. The review also includes a chapter on policy to assist faculty in developing students' appreciation of advocacy and its role in social work practice.

The first two chapters provide an important overview of the prevalence, trends, and consequences associated with substance use and abuse in older adults. Content in these chapters focuses particularly on establishing the reasons professional social workers need to understand and be prepared to address substance use, abuse, and dependence among older adults. The material in these chapters can be covered in depth, extracted for use in course content about prevalence of problems in diverse populations, or

condensed into a brief introductory overview as a prelude to covering content on direct practice or policy. The remaining chapters address screening and assessment (Chapter 3); detection and assessment (Chapter 4) treatment and intervention (Chapter 5); policy issues (Chapter 6); and research questions and future research (Chapter 7). The research and curriculum resources described in the chapters on screening and assessment, treatment and intervention, and prevention may be particularly salient to course content related to direct practice. In addition to using Chapter 6, instructors seeking useful materials for policy content may elect to draw from the treatment and intervention chapter (5), which includes content on strategies for the prevention of alcohol and other drug problems. Chapter 7 explores future directions and poses questions for research and knowledge development to advance policy and practice may be particularly useful in research courses. A separate PowerPoint file with slides that correspond to the literature review sections is also available for instructors to use as they present the information in their classes.

This Resource Review concludes with an appendix listing key curriculum resources for use in MSW advanced courses. We selected curricula resources based on their accessibility (e.g., free or low cost, easy to obtain), ease of use, and utility for advanced MSW courses. The descriptions provide detailed information that allow instructors to select and obtain materials best suited to their courses. Our intention in structuring this Resource Review for Teaching is to facilitate the instructor's inclusion of content on older adults in AODA practice and policy courses and to strengthen the curriculum- and skill-building goals in preparing social work practitioners for AODA practice.

Methodology for the Research Review

Even though older adults are a minority in alcohol and other drug treatment facilities, practitioners and researchers have been writing about AODA and older people, especially in relation to alcohol use and abuse, for several decades (Nace, 1984; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 1988; Liberto, Oslin, & Ruskin, 1992; Dufour & Fuller, 1995). A number of books and descriptive articles provide information on the nature of alcohol and drug problems among older people and recommendations for treatment and recovery. Social work texts in chemical dependency have included chapters on older adults (McNeece & DiNitto, 2005; Straussner, 2004). However, even new editions of standard textbooks on chemical dependency counseling have scant information on older adults (Perkinson, 2008). This research review focuses on the empirical literature in the social sciences published within the past 10 years. In some cases the review includes a study published prior to 1997, but only if that study provided a particularly important perspective or empirical finding related to the topic.

Evidence Criteria: In social work, educators, researchers, and practitioners are engaged in a continuing debate about how to define and operationalize evidence to

support practice interventions. To choose the resources included in this review, we sorted information according to the strength of the evidence base using guidelines from Siwek and colleagues (2002) and the Center for Substance Abuse Services (2007). We excluded pilot studies, case studies, clinical impressions, and descriptive studies without empirical data. We have included studies that used quasi-experimental or randomized controlled designs as well as retrospective and prospective epidemiological investigations. We also have included meta-analyses and literature reviews focused on empirical studies. In addition, we did not exclude studies based on sample size because much of the treatment literature includes programmatic evaluations of specific interventions with older adults. However, we do discuss briefly the type of evidence provided in the studies reviewed so the reader may make an informed decision about the strength of the information. This is not a classic evidence-based review, but it does take into account the level of evidence.

The Search Process: Selecting search terms was the first step in the process. In consultation with a reference librarian at the Lillian and Milford Harris Library, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, we chose a broad strategy to identify studies of older adults. Because different search engines identify the population of older adults differently, using a variety of search terms is important. To capture studies of older adults we selected the following search terms: aging, aged, elder, elderly, frail elderly, old, older adult, and older people. We used a similarly broad selection of terms to identify literature on alcohol and other drug abuses including the following: alcohol, alcoholism, drug abuse, drug misuse, chemical dependence, prescription drug abuse, medication misuse, polypharmacy, problem drinker, substance abuse, substance use, and substance dependence. We used the following electronic databases: Abstracts in Social Gerontology, Academic Search Complete, Ageline Silver Platter, Annual Reviews of Social Sciences (including anthropology, medicine, psychology and sociology), CINAHL plus with full text, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Medline, Medline with full text, PubMed, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, SocINDEX, SocINDEX with full text. Searches were also restricted to the inclusion parameter “from 1997 through 2007”. Selected abstracts and full text pdfs, when available, were entered in to RefWorks bibliographic software.

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