Suicide is a serious public health issue that is growing in significance, particularly among women. According to data for the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were 9,659 women who died from suicide in 2014 in the United States, making it the 14th leading cause of death for women and the 4th leading cause of death among individuals between ages 15 and 54. This represents a 33% increase in suicide rates between 2003 and 2014, from 4.1 per 100,000 women to 6.1 per 100,000 women in 2014. Suicide rates for women increased more than those for men during this time period, although men are more likely to die by suicide. An important factor in many suicide attempts is substance abuse.

There is substantial evidence that suicide risk is higher for women with substance abuse problems. Women with a substance use disorder are about 3 times more likely to die by suicide than men with a substance abuse disorder, and the risk for suicide is about 10 times greater for women treated for alcohol abuse and dependence than for the general population. In fact, about 20% of men and 15% of women who commit suicide have an alcohol problem, whereas about 13% of men and 15% of women who commit suicide have a substance abuse problem. Further, women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence, which increases risk for both suicide and substance abuse. Women who have experienced intimate partner violence who also abuse drugs or alcohol are more likely to attempt suicide. Other factors that increase the risk for both suicide and substance abuse include personal loss (e.g., divorce, separation, death), legal or criminal justice problems, history of abuse, trauma, or violence, past suicidal behavior and attempts, drinking or using drugs at an early age, family history of substance abuse, job problems, unemployment, or financial loss, and access to firearms.
Alcohol is a factor in about 30-40% of suicides and suicide attempts, whereas drug-related suicide attempts rose 41% between 2004 and 2011, leading to over 200,000 emergency department visits in 2011. Substance use can cause increased disinhibition, an increased focus on the short-term rather than long-term consequences, depressed mood, increased hopelessness, impaired problem solving, and increased aggression, all of which may increase the likelihood of attempting suicide. Many individuals abuse drugs or alcohol in an attempt to relieve the symptoms of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions. Although substances may seem to help in the short term, substance abuse or dependence aggravate mental health issues over time.

Only 11% of people with substance use disorder get treatment, even though the suicide rate among people with untreated substance use disorders is up to 45%. Fear of stigma can play a role in keeping people from getting help. There are a number of promising treatment options such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy that may reduce the risk of suicide attempts by as much as 50 percent. Many inpatient treatment centers provide treatment options for people with suicidal thoughts and/or substance use disorders, offering 24-hour care to help control suicide risk factors. Outpatient care, including individual and group therapy, is an alternative or follow-up to inpatient care that is available in many communities. When being treated for any mental health issues, patients should be completely honest about their alcohol and drug intake for the safest treatment and the best chance of getting better. Women interested in treatment for substance abuse, suicidal behavior, or both should consult with mental healthcare providers to determine the treatment with the best fit.

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