

Study finds conditions of retirement can lead to substance abuse disorders among older adults

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Close to three million Americans aged 55 and older suffer from alcohol abuse—and this figure is expected to reach nearly 6 million by 2020. While alcohol abuse remains prevalent among them, the rate of illicit drug abuse in adults over 50 more than doubled between 2002 and 2013.

Many of the older Americans suffering from substance abuse are retired. But according to Tel Aviv University research, it is not [retirement](#) alone that leads to drug and [alcohol abuse](#), but rather a host of circumstances surrounding leaving the work force, which often coincides with painful

later-life events such as the death of spouses and friends.

Published in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Work, Aging and Retirement*, the comprehensive ten-year study, funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), was conducted by Prof. Peter A. Bamberger of TAU's Faculty of Management and Cornell University's Smithers Institute, and Prof. Samuel B. Bacharach of Cornell University. The two also co-authored *Retirement and the Hidden Epidemic* (Oxford University Press, 2014), a layman's summary of their many studies on the subject.

More than lack of work

According to the study, older adults often lack the skills required to cope with the sudden vacuum produced by retirement as well as events common to later life—such as deteriorating health and the death of spouses and friends. The research also pointed to the impact of circumstances and conditions of retirement on feelings of depression, purposelessness, and financial strain, which are known to lead to substance abuse.

"We found that the conditions under which people retired—whether they were pushed into it or it was something expected, which they planned for—had great bearing on alcohol and drug habits," said Prof. Bamberger. "The worst combination we found was among people who took early retirement from jobs they loved because they were terrified their companies were going under. Among all groups studied, this one exhibited the highest incidence of substance abuse.

"Our second major finding was that the conditions experienced once in retirement influenced alcohol and drug habits," Prof. Bamberger continued. "Even if an individual plans for retirement, he/she might not fully grasp the changes that must be made to his/her lifestyle. As a result,

many people experience serious financial straits. Feeling unstable, lonely, and depressed, it isn't surprising perhaps—but it is unfortunate—that many retirees look to alcohol or drugs for comfort."

The study, conducted as an annual phone-based survey of 1,200 service, construction, and manufacturing workers aged 52-75, also found that retirement can cause marital strain, and this too may precipitate or exacerbate substance misuse or abuse. "Financial strain and marital strain, both potential consequences of retirement, elicited problems with sleep. This in particular explained much of males' misuse of alcohol," said Prof. Bamberger.

A silver lining for the silver years

Much can be done to prevent retirees from bottoming out, including screening and brief interventions aimed at identifying behavioral changes that could lead to [substance abuse](#). "Sometimes awareness alone is enough to bring about positive change," said Prof. Bamberger. "Even short phone calls or brief Internet-based feedback can be so instrumental. The other way of reversing this trend is to provide ways of coping with the stresses of retirement. Retirement groups and mentors are often able to pick up on signs of deterioration before they become a problem."

Prof. Bamberger is currently working on a new NIH-sponsored study examining the [alcohol](#)-related consequences of the college-to-work transition among younger people.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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