

Women's experiences living with a family member's substance misuse: a metaphorical analysis

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Background: Research has shown that substance misuse may have significant consequences for the mental and physical health and wellbeing of other family members. Women are affected by this more frequently than men. These negative consequences persist over time and vary by relationship status.

Aim: To explore how women experience and are affected by substance misuse in the family.

Methods: A metaphorical analysis of qualitative narrative interviews with 11 daughters and 5 wives of older adults (> 65 years) affected by substance misuse.

Results: We identified four primary themes pertaining to women's: 1. experiences (ups and downs and walking on eggshells); 2. coping strategies (complicity and silencing); 3. dilemmas (deceit or disease and 'open' or 'closed' dilemmas); and 4. consequences (identity, health and varying kinds of help).

Conclusions: Metaphors enable family members to allude to sensitive and shameful feelings and experiences indirectly, presenting opportunities to address sensitive topics, generate emotional distance from a difficult subject matter and therapeutic tools for overcoming challenges. As such, metaphors may offer health professionals a variety of therapeutic points of entry into family members' experiences and support needs.

«A metaphor is a construction that mediates an experience or situation by describing it in the imagery of another experience or situation» (Ricoeur, 2003)

«Ups and downs» Even if he hasn't been drinking every day, or every week even, maybe just once in a month, it's always just beneath the surface, and you think, "What's next? When will it blow up again?"

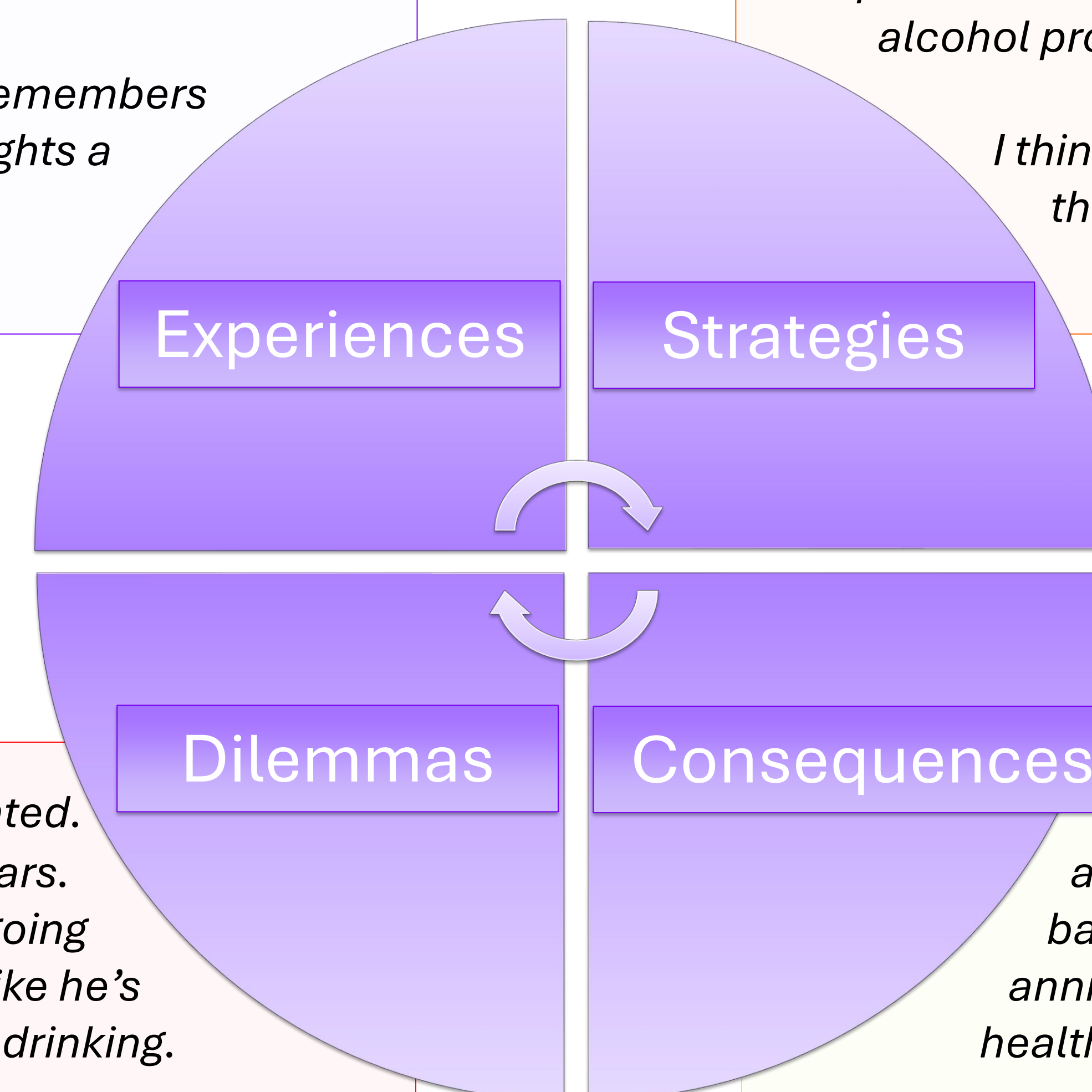
«Walking on eggshells» I think children develop antennas, like little tactile hairs that extend outside their bodies. I grew up in the country, and I could feel it physically when I got close to home. I felt, "It's happening"; and generally it was.

When he combines sleeping pills with alcohol he remembers nothing. Then he stumbles upstairs, throws up or lights a cigarette in bed. It's dangerous. I'm worried what'll happen if I'm not there.

«Complicity» I acknowledge I'm complicit, an enabler. It's very, very hard to admit that (...), if he's very, very down and depressed, anguished, stressed, I'll buy him a bottle. It's so totally against everything I really stand for. It's a hard admission.

«Silencing» I come from a very small town, and I think they knew Mama well enough not to want to be involved. I could be invited to a sleepover because Mama was "ill", for example, "had the flu". The alcohol problem was never mentioned.

I think the older generation hide it more than others. She thought that no one knew, but everyone knew.



«Deceit or disease» I'm angry, sad, disappointed. I feel like I've been deceived, systematically, for years. I try to understand that it's an illness, but it's been going on for years, and nothing really seems to help. It's like he's playing to the gallery, enabling him to just continue drinking.

«Open and closed dilemmas» I've blocked out memories, specific events. There's a particular mixture of feelings where you're deeply ashamed, but also terrified (...). My coping strategy as a child was just to switch off. Like fight or flight. This still affects me in adulthood. I have serious anxiety.

«Identity» I've not focused on myself. I've always been focused on other people's needs. This has basically been the pattern all my life (...). It's like I've annihilated myself. Disappeared. It's led to mental health issues

«Health and help» I got anxiety rather late. It (therapy) focused on anxiety but didn't treat everything else – the lack of belonging.

We're stronger together. It helps to talk to other people who've been (...) It's like without knowing each other you suddenly sit there and realise you share the same experiences.