

Old Age Psychiatry CBL 6: The patient who drinks too much

Learning Outcomes

1. To recognise the features of substance dependence in the elderly
2. To understand the basic principles of management of substance dependence in the elderly

Case history

Graham is an 81 year old man referred to your community team for memory assessment following attendance in A&E for confusion and a fall. He comes into clinic for an assessment. Graham sadly lost his wife Lillian of 50 years last year to cancer. Since this time, he feels he has lost all purpose in life and doesn't know what to do. He walks down to the local pub most days to see a friendly face and play darts.

You ask Graham how much he drinks at the pub, initially he replies 'oh just a few pints here and there'. You enquire further and Graham sheepishly confirms he is drinking 8 pints of lager per day. He used to drink 3 pints but this no longer relaxes him. Graham used to work as an accountant in the city and has always enjoyed a drink and good company. He has always been a worrier and struggled with anxiety throughout his life but never sought help. He struggles with his breathing at times due to COPD. Graham speaks to his adult children on the telephone every so often who live a few hours away, he doesn't like to bother them as he knows they are very busy.

Graham admits that he sometimes has a beer in the morning with breakfast to 'steady the nerves'. He did try to stop drinking but started to sweat and feel shaky. Graham knows his alcohol intake is too much and does feel guilty. He would like some help to stop if possible.

Questions

1. What else would you wish to elicit from the history?
2. What other diagnoses should be considered and explored?
3. What are the features of dependence syndrome?
4. What are the risk factors for late onset alcohol problems in this case and generally?
5. What investigations might you consider?
6. How might Graham be supported? What options for management are there? Consider pharmacological and non-pharmacological options.