

Exploring Effects of Alcohol Abuse on a Marital Couples Communication Pattern: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol abuses among marital couples are associated with negative marital and family interactions. The family functioning including family interactional patterns gradually declines often resulting into marital dissatisfactions and a poorer quality of life within the marriage. Numerous studies were explored with the aim to explore and understand how alcohol abuse can impact the marital interactions among couples with alcohol abuse. We found nine studies that fit our criteria by searching through various online databases like Google Scholar, PubMed, Web of Science, and ProQuest. These studies are original research articles from the last fifteen years that look at how alcohol abuse affects the interactions between couples. Findings highlighted that alcohol consumption among couples often worsens marital interactions, making it difficult to establish clear boundaries, roles, responsibilities, conflict resolutions, and decision-making abilities among alcoholic couples. On the other hand, evidence-based studies such as family-focused interventions and behavioral couple therapy reduce faulty communications and negative statements and enhance attempts to clarify expectations, roles, responsibilities, problem-solving abilities, and conflict resolutions among couples with alcohol abuse. To improve marital satisfaction and quality of life in marriage, addressing issues related to alcohol abuse is of greater concern for professionals working closely with the area. Although the fields of alcohol abuse and substance abuse are often delicate and demanding, they present significant challenges.

Keywords: *Communication patterns, Alcohol abuse, marital couples, family interactions*

A family with an alcohol-dependent person faces numerous psychosocial challenges. Alcohol use disorder (AUD) increases the risk for developing physical health complications, mental health challenges and social ostracization at the individual level (WHO, 2020). However, significant others and immediate family members of individuals with alcohol use disorders are susceptible to numerous psychosocial challenges. Furthermore, spousal alcoholism adversely affects the various dimensions of family functioning that are related to family interaction, such as conflict resolutions, expressions of warmth, reinforcements, and caring or affectionate behaviors (Johnson, 2001). Spousal alcohol consumption also influences the marital interactional dynamics (Rangarajan, 2006). Studies reported that spousal alcoholism was associated with negative family

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communication patterns, such as a lack of positive regard and a lack of expressions of feelings (Jones and Houts 1992).

Alcohol is the most commonly consumed alcoholic beverage among people worldwide. It is a psychoactive and toxic substance that contains a substance called ethanol with dependence-producing properties (WHO, 2018). While alcohol dependency impacts both genders to a greater extent, it primarily affects men. Furthermore, in 2016, AUD ranked among the most prevalent mental health problems globally, affecting approximately 8.6% of men and 1.7% of women, resulting in a global prevalence rate of 5.1% (WHO, 2018; Rehm & Shield, 2019). Despite the higher prevalence rate of alcohol consumption, which carries significant risks for both physical and mental health complications, the number of untreated patients with alcohol use disorders is increasing due to social stigma (Carvalho et al., 2019) and a lack of effort and motivation to seek treatment from professionals.

Alcohol use disorder not only raises concerns for the individual with the problems, but it also has a significantly adverse effect on family functioning, including family or marital communication patterns, leading to marital dissatisfaction and deteriorating marital quality of life. Therefore, developing insights into the ill effects of a spouse's alcohol abuse on marital or family interactional dynamics is important. Communication is the means through which feelings, thoughts, and opinions are expressed to achieve certain couple goals when individuals are tied together in marriage and are expected to fulfill or achieve couple goals together. Faulty communications not only create misunderstandings or conflicts among partners, but they also make it difficult to establish clear boundaries, fulfill expected roles and responsibilities, and build intimate and healthy relationships with partners. Therefore, this review aims to evaluate the study that focuses on the effects of spousal alcohol abuse on marital interaction patterns.

METHODS

Search strategies:

The empirical research articles for the review study were identified through electronic database searches such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Web of Science, and ProQuest. This review included original research articles that emphasized understanding the impacts of male alcohol abuse on marital or family communication. The review included articles published in the English language from 2009 to 2024, all of which were fully accessible.

Search key terms:

The search terms or phrases used to identify research articles were “communication pattern and male alcohol use,” “impacts of male alcohol use on marital communication,” “effect of male alcohol use on couple’s interaction pattern,” and “male alcohol abuse AND communication problems.”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- The review study included research conducted among married couples, especially to assess the effects of male or female alcohol abuse on marital or family communication patterns.
- Studies conducted in both clinical and non-clinical settings were included.

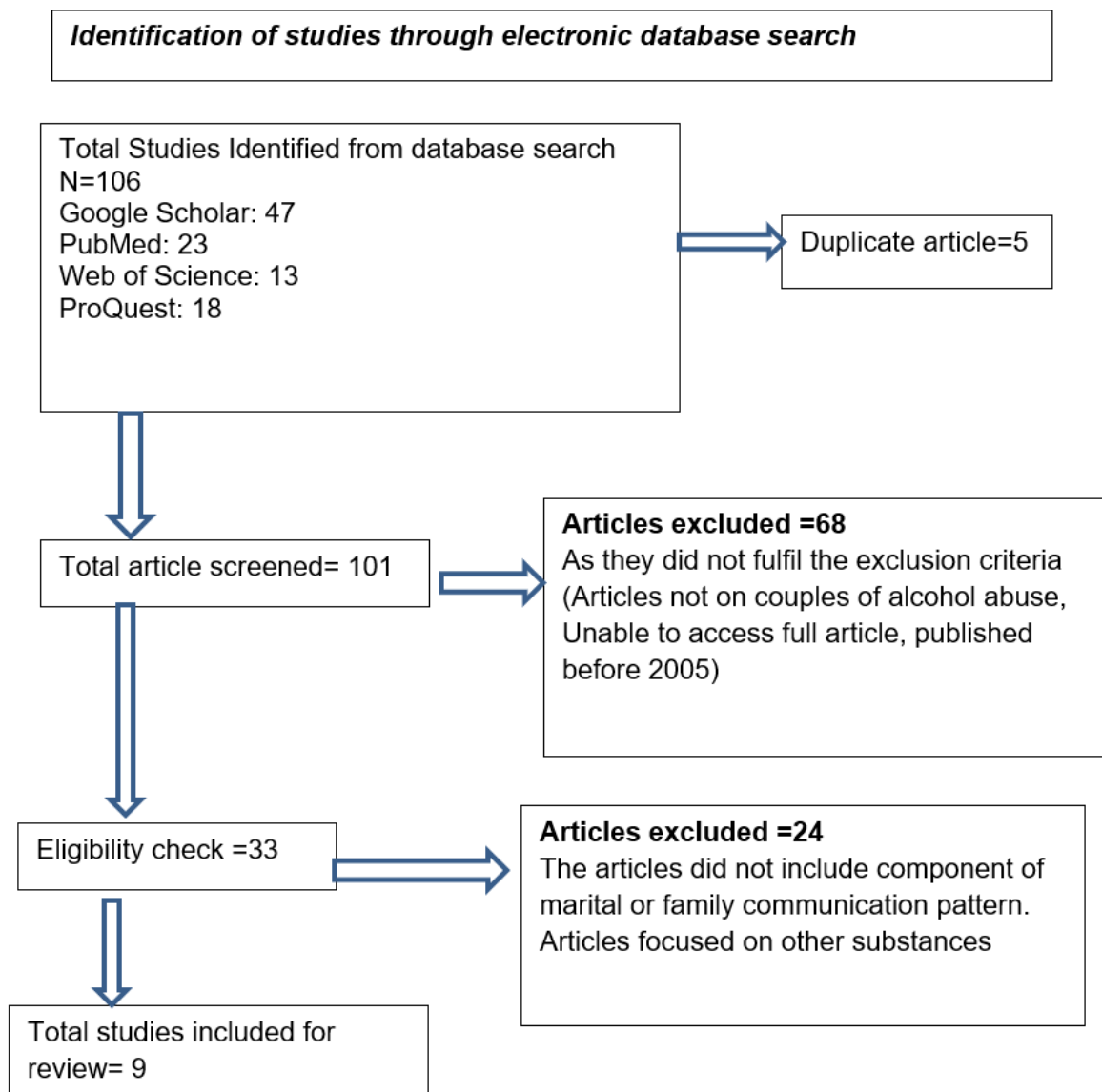
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- The studies employed both qualitative and quantitative study approaches, and articles published in the English language with full access to the articles were included in the study.

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies not in the English language, with no access to full articles, and published before 2009 were excluded from the review.
- Studies that did not include the components of marital or family communication patterns among alcohol abuse couples were also excluded from the study.
- Studies not children or other age group apart from marital alcoholic couples.

Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart showing the review study selection procedure:



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Table 1: Summary table of review articles

References	Aim	Methods	Assessment Instruments
Singh (2009)	To examine the interaction patterns in families with male partners alcohol dependence syndrome	A cross-sectional study. Purposive sampling techniques	Family Interaction Pattern Scale (FIPS)
Stanley (2012)	To understand the nature of marital adjustment and the interaction pattern in the families of alcoholic and non-alcoholic husbands	Institutional based study. Wives of alcoholics and non-alcoholics	The family Interaction Pattern Scale (FIPS)
Matto, et al. (2013)	Family burden with substance dependence: a study from India	A cross-sectional study	Family burden Interview Schedule
Walitzer & Dermen (2013)	Couple communication among problem drinking males and their spouses	A randomized controlled trial. 3 treatment conditions	Rapid marital interaction coding system.
Kwon, et al. (2015)	To assess effects of a spouse's AUD on family functioning and family communication	A cross-sectional study. 890 participants (445 couples) in a Korea family cohort in primary care.	Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale (FACES)-IV questionnaire to assess family communication
Molla, et al. (2018)	To analyse the effects of alcohol and substance use on a couple system.	A Clinical Case Study	AUDIT-C to assess problematic alcohol use and verbal clinical assessment. BCT in the form of couple's therapy
Woolf-King et al. (2019)	To explore the association of alcohol use with relationship functioning among heterosexual couples from rural South Africa	Dyadic analyses conducted with 886 participants	The 3-item mutually constructive communication (MCC) subscale of the communications Patterns Questionnaire
Kumar, et al. (2023)	To understand the differences in communication, couple satisfaction, relational boredom, and quality of life between men with AUD and their spouses	Hospital-based cross-sectional study. 30 men with AUD and 30 spouses participants aged 18 years and above	Self-perceived communication in a couple's relationship (SCCR) to assess communication pattern
Wang et al. (2024)	To explore the impact of a family intervention on the relapse rate of Chinese patients with alcohol dependence	Family Intervention. 151 male alcohol dependency	Family Function Rating Scale (FAD)

RESULTS

Summary of Review Findings

The studies on alcohol abuse or alcohol use disorder among married couples had shown that alcohol consumption by any of the marital partners has ill effects on the other partners or the significant others in the family. The negative effect of alcohol consumption is not only on the physical health or mental health aspects of the person who consumes it. But male alcohol abuse has a severe impact on overall family functioning, including family interactions among couples or the family as a whole. A cross-sectional study was undertaken to examine the interaction patterns in families (30 wives) of 30 men with alcohol dependence syndrome. The Family Interaction Pattern Scale (FIPS) was used to assess the interaction pattern in the family. The study revealed that there was a dysfunctional pattern of interactions in the families, which involved a lack of reinforcement, poorer partner support, inadequate role functioning, unclear and faulty communication patterns, and poor leadership styles. Poorer family interactions demonstrate overall unhealthy family functioning (Singh et al., 2009).

In another investigation, 150 wives of alcohol-dependent husbands were examined to understand differences in the interpersonal dynamics of couples living in alcohol-complicated and alcohol-free marital relationships in India. The study employed FIPS to evaluate the interaction patterns between the study group and the reference group, which consisted of wives of non-alcoholics. The study reported highlighted that the wives of alcoholics scored lower mean score in domains like reinforcement, role, communication, cohesion, social support, and leadership indicating dysfunctional in the subdomains of FIPS than the reference group (Stanley, 2012).

A cross-sectional study on family burden and substance dependence in India was conducted using the Family Burden Interview Schedule. The result revealed that, along with other dimensions like disruption of family routine and financial burden, it was also found that there was moderate to severe disruption of family interactions (Mattoo et al., 2013).

A study evaluated the effects of alcohol-focused spouses and behavioral couple therapy (BCT) on communication differences between problem-drinking males and their spouses. According to the report, the couple's participation in the alcohol-focused treatment helped in the reduction of drinking, and BCT also enhanced the couple's communication, resulting in better conflict resolution and fewer negative interactions. Additionally, the combination of both approaches—alcohol-focused and BCT therapy—enhanced better outcomes for both alcohol use and relationship functioning (Walitzer et al. 2013).

A study conducted among 445 couples in a Korean family cohort in primary care using Family Communication FACES-IV revealed that there was no significant difference in adaptability and cohesion between both male and female participants with a spouse with AUD and participants with a spouse without AUD. Furthermore, the study revealed that having a female spouse with AUD worsens the quality of family communication (Kwon et al. 2015).

A clinical case study aimed to analyze the effects of alcohol and substance use on a couple system and showed how cognitive behavioral therapy interventions can be implemented within alcohol and even substance abuse contexts to create change in a couple system. The study used AUDIT-C to assess problematic alcohol use and verbal clinical assessment to identify and evaluate other psychosocial problems within the couple system. The initial

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assessment revealed that the couple struggled with establishing clear boundaries, repairing trust, maintaining positive communication, and fostering intimacy in their relationship. Through cognitive behavioral therapy, positive outcomes were enhanced, such as resolving conflict and decision-making attempts to clarify expectations, roles, rules, and responsibilities between the couple (Molla et al. 2018).

The researchers used the three-item mutually constructive communication (MCC) subscale and a six-item subscale of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire to explore the association of alcohol use with relationship functioning among heterosexual couples from rural South Africa. The study revealed that women with a male partner who was a hazardous drinker reported higher use of the demand/withdraw pattern of communication compared to women whose male partners were abstainers (Woolf-King et al. 2019).

Another investigation was conducted by Kumar et al. (2023) to understand the differences in communication, couple satisfaction, relational boredom, and quality of life between men with AUD and their spouses among 30 spouses aged 18 years and above in hospital settings. The study employed Self-Perceived Communication in a Couple's Relationship (SCCR) to evaluate the communication pattern. The study reported that the mean scores of communications and relationship boredom were significantly higher among female spouses than among men. Furthermore, communication and relationships showed a positive correlation.

Wang et al. (2024) conducted a family intervention study involving 151 male alcohol dependents to explore the impact of family intervention on the relapse rate of Chinese patients with alcohol dependence. The Family Function Rating Scale (FAD) was administered to assess the family functioning, including the communication pattern of the study participants. The study reported that the family training in the intervention group improved participants and their families' communication patterns.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the numerous research studies on the effects of spousal alcohol abuse on marital or family interaction patterns revealed significant insights. Alcohol abuse by a partner leads to adverse consequences for oneself and the significant others in the family (Eashwar et al., 2020). Positive communication patterns are associated with better marital quality of life, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and decision-making abilities among the couples. Positive communication that includes warmth, affectionate behaviors, affectionate involvement, and positive reinforcement that have been linked to intimate partner relationships and better marital quality of life among married couples. Whereas wives are more like to perceive poorer communications when their male partners are on their drinking phase (Rodriguez et al., 2013). Communication are essential elements of marital life as it helps in establishing marital relationships, influence their level of satisfactions and quality of life (Lavner et al., 2016). Boral et al. (2016) in a study reported that alcohol consumption among married couples is strongly linked to poor marital quality, which arises from faulty communication patterns and behaviors that develop as a result of alcohol dependency, ultimately leading to poor adjustment, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction in their marital relationships.

Working with the spouse of an alcohol-dependent person and their immediate partners or significant others in their families are of the utmost importance. Though many efforts have

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been made to address the various psychosocial issues faced by the person who has developed alcohol use disorders, evidence also shows that immediate partners (wives) are actively involved in the treatment plans those seeking help for their AUD spouses. The primary focus of the treatment plans is often on the person with alcohol dependence, aiming to help them develop alcohol-free behavior. The other psychosocial needs of the person and the family members are also addressed, keeping the addicted person as the central focus of the treatment plan. As alcohol use disorder in partners are often associated with negative consequences on marital life and family life (Farid et al., 1989; Leonard et al., 1996; Steinglass, 1976). Male drinking habits often provoke higher level of stress due to frequent quarrels and wife and child beating and it is possibly that such adverse outcome negatively impacts the marital life and quality of life in marriage due to stressful situations (Zweben, 1986).

The review study finding revealed that alcohol consumption among partners worsens the communication pattern among the marital couples, making it difficult to carry out expected roles and responsibilities of the family in an expected manner. Alcohol abuse in the family often leads to conflicts regarding family rules. In support of this, a study reported that couples with men who have antisocial alcohol abuse experience hostile marital interactions (Floyd et al., 2006). Establishing family rules like dining together, spending quality time together, sitting and interacting with each other, watching TV, or praying together often becomes difficult. Frequently, the individual returns home late at night, when the children or other family members are asleep. The review also revealed that alcohol dependency leads to poorer family interaction patterns that impact reinforcements and are replaced by blaming, criticizing, or leveling each other's behaviors. It also leads to a lack of social support and poor role performance and affects the leadership qualities of the family members. Furthermore, it also leads to difficulty in establishing clear boundaries, intimate relationships, conflict resolutions, decision-making abilities, and failure in clarifying expectations among family members. According to studies, alcohol consumption often leads to faulty communication, which can result in intimate partner violence among married couples (Harber & Jacob, 1997). In other words, couples who often experience physical or verbal violence may often experience more negative marital interactions than those who were not involved in neither in physical or verbal abuses (Leonard & Eiden, 2007)

The marital dysfunctions are often addressed through marital therapy, couple therapy, and family-focused intervention. The review study also showed that family interventions and clinical case studies aimed at improving family dynamics, including communication styles and couple relationships, had very good results. Family interventions among the couples with alcohol use disorders showed improvements in their family communication patterns. On the other hand, clinical case studies that used BCT as an intervention strategy showed improvements in enhancing couples' abilities to adopt positive conflict resolution techniques and decision-making skills, as well as to clarify expectations, roles, rules, and responsibilities between them.

Limitations

The study possesses several limitations. The review includes studies that examine the components of communication patterns and family interactional patterns among couples affected by Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD). The studies mostly employed standardized tools, like Likert-type rating scales, to evaluate the family interaction patterns among couples with AUD. The Liker-type rating scales are restricted to objectivity analysis. As a result, the

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verbatim interpretation of the participants' actual meaning presents limited opportunities for subjective analysis, potentially obscuring their true meaning.

CONCLUSION

The review clearly indicates that spousal alcohol consumption negatively affects marital interaction patterns, resulting in unclear family roles and responsibilities, challenges in conflict resolution and decision-making, mistrust, and issues in intimate partner relationships. Therefore, couples with AUD experience a substantial decline in their marital satisfaction and quality of life. The evidence-based studies also showed that addressing the issues of couple interactional dynamics is possible with effective intervention like family-focused intervention and behavioral couple therapy. Other literature also shows that treatment plans for people with AUD, with the involvement of significant others (spouses), help enhance positive outcomes in terms of marital interactional dynamics.

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Conflict of Interest

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