

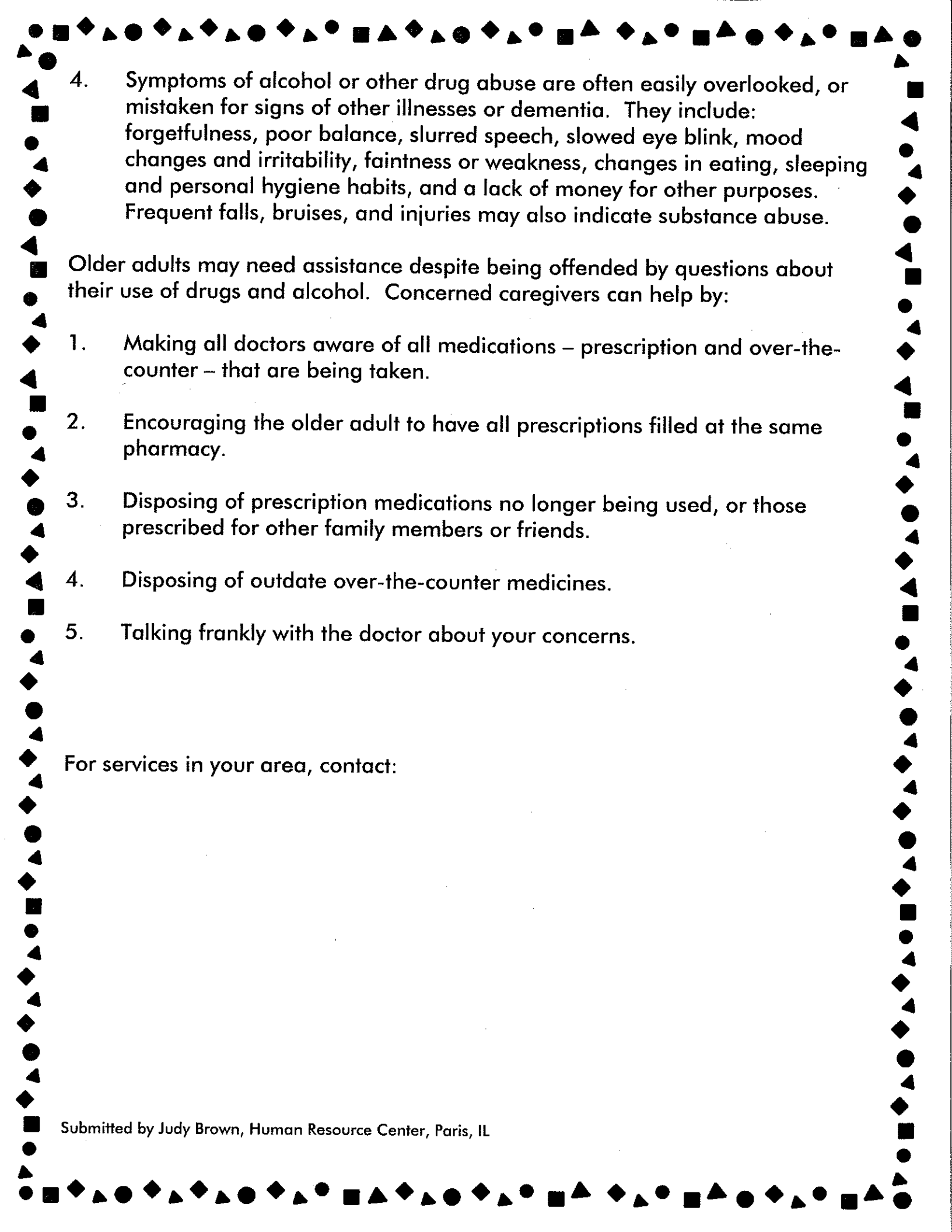
Facts on Alcohol, Drug Use and Older Adults

There is no other group of people for whom the stigma of drug usage more alive. For those raised in the early part of the 20th Century, an alcoholic or drug dependent person was the same as being immoral, unclean, lazy, and lack of normal "will power" and "respectability". If this is how you see a person with a chemical dependency problem, it is important to understand that it may also be how your mother or father, grandmother or grandfather may see the situation.

When the drugs that are being abused are prescribed by a doctor, purchased at the pharmacy, paid for by Medicare or other health insurance, it becomes difficult to compare that with our stereotype of drug addiction.

The fact is that for many older adults, abuse of or addiction to alcohol and other drugs seriously lowers their quality of life and increases the risk of injury or illness. Some issues for awareness include:

1. Many older adults take several prescription medications that are prescribed by several different doctors. Along with these prescribed medicines, they may use several over-the-counter preparations regularly. At least half also drink alcohol, at least occasionally. The combination of these medications, with alcohol, may impair the older adult's ability to safely go up and down stairs and curbs, use machinery including their car, handle tools and knives, and remember to put out their cigarette or turn off the stove. The result is an greater chance of accidental injury, or accidental overdose. Also, keep in mind that people often lose weight as they get older, and may not have the same body weight that they did in years past when medications were originally prescribed, or when they began a pattern of drinking. Less body weight + same amount of a drug = higher level of that drug in the body.
2. Changes in body, including liver and kidney function due to illness may result in slower elimination of drugs and alcohol from the body than for younger people.
3. Older adults may "hoard" prescriptions from earlier illnesses, or from family members' illnesses, or keep out of date over-the-counter medications in an effort not to waste them, and to save money. This results in medications being in the home that are not currently prescribed which may be taken by mistake, or in an effort to "doctor" themselves.

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4. Symptoms of alcohol or other drug abuse are often easily overlooked, or mistaken for signs of other illnesses or dementia. They include: forgetfulness, poor balance, slurred speech, slowed eye blink, mood changes and irritability, faintness or weakness, changes in eating, sleeping and personal hygiene habits, and a lack of money for other purposes. Frequent falls, bruises, and injuries may also indicate substance abuse.

Older adults may need assistance despite being offended by questions about their use of drugs and alcohol. Concerned caregivers can help by:

1. Making all doctors aware of all medications – prescription and over-the-counter – that are being taken.
2. Encouraging the older adult to have all prescriptions filled at the same pharmacy.
3. Disposing of prescription medications no longer being used, or those prescribed for other family members or friends.
4. Disposing of outdate over-the-counter medicines.
5. Talking frankly with the doctor about your concerns.

For services in your area, contact: