

Facts about addiction and depression

People with alcohol and other drug dependencies often suffer from co-occurring mental health illnesses.

Mental health and recovery

Individuals with untreated mental health issues may experience more difficulty in recovery. Sadness, despair, and depression are prevalent problems among alcoholics and addicts. It can be difficult to differentiate major depression from the emotional turbulence of addiction for any of the following reasons:

- Many drugs themselves are depressants, including alcohol, sedatives, and minor tranquilizers.
- Many symptoms of depression appear during withdrawal from drugs. For example, cocaine addicts typically experience a “crash” three to five days after their last use.
- Alcohol or drugs may provide a chemical cushion to ward off the emotional impact of everyday events. Without the drug, a person experiences feelings again and may think these feelings are not normal.
- The normal course of addiction may have brought about many tragedies (divorce, loss of custody of children) that cause intense, but normal, grief.
- Loss of relationship with the drug of choice can cause grief. Alcohol and other drugs often become a “best friend” that is always there to provide solace and relief.

Many symptoms of depression generally go away with abstinence from drugs and alcohol, and from utilizing the Twelve Steps to increase coping skills.

What is major depression?

Major depression is an illness that involves the body, mind, and thought process. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way they feel about themselves, and the way they think. A depressive disorder is not the same as occasional sadness. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with depression cannot simply “pull themselves together” and get better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or even years.

Symptoms of depression

Not everyone that is depressed experiences every symptom. Some people have a few symptoms, some many. Severity of symptoms varies per person and over time.

Symptoms may include:

- Ongoing sad, anxious, or “empty” moods.
- Feelings of hopelessness or pessimism.
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed.
- Decreased energy, fatigue, or being “slowed down.”
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions.
- Insomnia, early morning awakening, or oversleeping.
- Changes in appetite and/or weight.
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts.
- Restlessness and/or irritability.
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment (such as headaches, digestive disorders, and perhaps even chronic pain).³

Prevalence of depression

Most research suggests that the rate of major depression is two to four times higher among alcoholics and addicts than in the general population. About 30 to 40% of people seeking help for alcohol and drug problems suffer from major depression.^{1,2}

As in the general population, the rate of depression among female alcoholics and addicts is about twice as high as in males.² When a person with alcohol or drug dependency has major depression, they require mental health treatment in addition to treatment for addiction.

Diagnosis of depression

Careful diagnosis is critical. If you identify with these symptoms of depression, it is important that you have an assessment by a mental health professional that has expertise in alcohol and drug dependency.

Treatments available

Typically depression for alcoholics and addicts is treated with psychotherapy and often antidepressants.² Studies have demonstrated that antidepressant therapy is effective in reducing depression among alcoholics. The use of antidepressants is understood and supported by Alcoholics Anonymous. However, it is important that medication is just part of the treatment plan and does not replace the work of recovery. It is important to discuss medication options with a professional who has knowledge about substance abuse and dependency because some medications may be addictive.⁴

About Mental Health Services

Mental health services at Hazelden are part of the internationally recognized Hazelden Foundation. Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden's comprehensive approach to addiction addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

For more information about mental health services at Hazelden, please call 800-257-7800.

References

- 1 Rosental, R.N. & Westrich, L. (1991) Treatment of persons with dual diagnosis of substance use disorder and other psychological problems, In B.S. McCrady & E.E. Epstein, (eds) *Addiction: A comprehensive guidebook*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2 Ramino, E. B. Schuckit, M.A. (1999). Alcohol dependence and mood disorders. *Addictive Behaviors*. 23,933-946.
- 3 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Fourth Edition, Text Revision. (2000) American Psychiatric Association, Washington, D.C.
- 4 DeRubeis, R.J., Felfand, L.A., Tang, T.Z. et al. (1999). Medications versus cognitive behavioral therapy for severely depressed outpatient: Meta-analysis of four randomized comparisons. *American journal of Psychiatry*, 156,1007-1013.