

CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS IN ADULTS

A person who has a mental illness and a substance use disorder is said to have a co-occurring disorder. To recover fully, the person needs integrated treatment for both problems. The term co-occurring disorder is often used interchangeably with dual disorder, dual diagnosis, concurrent disorder, or co-morbid disorder. Roughly 50% of individuals with severe mental disorders are affected by substance abuse.

▼ What are the types of co-occurring disorders?

There is no single type of co-occurring disorder due to the fact that there are many forms of mental illnesses. Some forms of mental illness can severely impair an individual's ability to function effectively and relate well to others. Others may be impaired during ongoing periodic episodes or cycles. The degree of impairment due to mental illness may vary greatly from mild or moderate to severe, or it may occur in mixed patterns. The nature of co-occurring disorders becomes even more complex when substance use is considered. Some people may choose to use a single type of drug while another person may use many different types of drugs. Some people use large amounts for the effects while other people use smaller amounts. Some people use daily, while others use on periodic binges. It becomes evident that there are many different forms of co-occurring disorders when the different types of mental illnesses and different patterns of substance use are all taken into account. However, in terms of co-occurring recovery, they do share one thing in common: an individual will need to focus their recovery efforts on both their mental illness and their substance abuse or dependency within a comprehensive personal program of recovery.

▼ What are the warning signs?

Many families do not recognize that their mentally ill family member also has a substance abuse problem. This is not surprising because many of the behavioral changes that lead to suspicion of drug problems in other people already exist in persons with mental illness. Therefore, such behaviors as being rebellious, argumentative, or "spacey" may be less reliable clues in this group. Of course there are also those individuals who react strongly to drugs and alcohol and whose unusually chaotic behaviors leave little doubt regarding the use of drugs. Observation of some of the following behaviors, however, may put families on the alert:

- Suddenly having money problems
- Appearance of new friends
- Valuables disappearing from the house
- Drug paraphernalia in the house
- Long periods of time in the bathroom
- Dilated or pinpointed eyes
- Needle marks

▼ What are the causes of co-occurring disorders?

A person with a mental illness, like depression, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder, might use alcohol or other drugs to cope with their illness. This is sometimes called self-medication and is one way a person can develop a co-occurring disorder. It works the other way too. Alcohol and other drugs may cause or aggravate symptoms of a mental illness. For example, studies show that drinking heavily more than once a week is linked to an increased risk of depression. As well, the social consequences that often come with problematic substance use (broken relationships, money problems, etc.) may cause depression or anxiety. In other words, a person's mental health – their moods, perceptions and behaviors – can be negatively affected by their use of alcohol or other drugs.

▼ **What are the risk factors associated with a co-occurring disorder?**

The risk factors for co-occurring disorders are the same as those for mental health problems or substance abuse problems. These factors include:

- Poverty or unstable income
- Difficulties at school
- Unemployment or problems at work
- Isolation or lack of a social network
- Lack of decent housing
- Family problems
- Family history of mental illness, substance abuse or co-occurring disorders
- Past or ongoing trauma or abuse

▼ **What should I expect from treatment?**

Treating both disorders at the same time, preferably with the same treatment team, is called integrated treatment. Integrated treatment uses the best techniques from mental health and substance abuse treatment, and combines them into a unique approach specifically designed for co-occurring disorders. This approach includes:

- Listening to what you want – only you can decide if you're ready to begin treatment for co-occurring disorders. If you're not ready yet your treatment team will listen to your concerns and help you with any problems you'd like to work on first.
- Trying a variety of treatments to find what works best for you – options include individual counseling, medications to treat mental illness or to help reduce substance use, informational materials, and groups specially designed to address co-occurring disorders.
- Working with others you'd like to help support you – your treatment team can work with your doctor, case manager, or other professionals who may be able to support your treatment. They can help your loved ones better understand your disorders and your treatment. They can also help you find a self-help group that understands the unique situation of people with co-occurring disorders.

▼ **What to do if you or someone you know is experiencing problems with a co-occurring disorder?**

Encourage the person to acknowledge their problems and seek help for themselves. Suggest a professional evaluation with a licensed physician, preferably at a center that is equipped to treat both mental illness and substance use conditions. If the person is reluctant, do the legwork yourself – find the facility, make the appointment, offer to go with the person. A little encouragement may be all it takes. If you talk to the physician first, be honest and candid about the troubling behavior. Your input may give the doctor valuable diagnostic clues.

Most of all – remember there is hope. As a friend or family member, you can play an important part by encouraging someone to seek treatment. By learning about co-occurring disorders, you can help this person find and stick with an effective treatment program. The more you know about co-occurring disorders, the more you will understand how substance abuse can go hand-in-hand with another psychiatric condition. As with any illness, a person with a co-occurring disorder can improve once proper treatment is received. By seeking out information, you can learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of co-occurring disorders – and help someone live a healthier or more fulfilling life.

For more information, please contact the
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