

DUAL DIAGNOSIS: MENTAL ILLNESS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Dual diagnosis is a term used to describe a person who is diagnosed with a mental illness and a substance use or abuse disorder at the same time. More than half of persons who have a serious mental illness also have a substance use or abuse disorder. Dual diagnosis is sometime referred to as co-occurring disorders or comorbidity. The term “comorbidity” describes two or more disorders occurring in the same person. They can occur at the same time or one after the other. Comorbidity also implies interactions between the illnesses that can worsen the course of both. It can be difficult to find treatment for someone who has a mental illness and also uses drugs or alcohol. Many programs that treat people with mental illness are not well prepared to treat substance abusers, and programs for substance abusers are not geared for people with mental illness. Individuals with dual diagnoses often bounce from one program to another, or are refused treatment by single-diagnosis programs. Gradually, specialized MISA (Mental Illness and Substance Abuse) programs are being established. These programs have staff trained to deal with both the mental illness and the substance abuse problem. IDDT (Integrated Dual Disorder Treatment) is an evidence-based treatment by a multidisciplinary team. IDDT team members collaborate regularly about the client’s progress and are not merely component parts.

Quick Facts about Dual Diagnosis

- The more severe the mental illness, the greater the likelihood that the person will also use or abuse an illicit substance.
- The drug most commonly used is alcohol, followed by marijuana and cocaine.
- Males ages 18 to 44 are at greatest risk.
- Adolescents with serious behavioral problems are 7 times more likely to have used or abused alcohol or a drug in the past month.
- Substance abuse complicates almost every aspect of care for the person with a mental illness.

Why do These Disorders Often Co-occur?

Research suggests the following possibilities for this common co-occurrence:

- Overlapping genetic vulnerabilities. Predisposing genetic factors may make a person susceptible to both addiction and other mental disorders or to having a greater risk of a second disorder once the first appears.
- Overlapping environmental triggers. Stress, trauma (such as physical or sexual abuse), and early exposure to drugs are common environmental factors that can influence the development of addiction and other mental illnesses.

Is Drug Addiction a Mental Illness?

Yes. Addiction changes the brain in fundamental ways, disturbing a person’s normal hierarchy of needs and desires and substituting new priorities connected with procuring and using the drug. The resulting compulsive behaviors that weaken the ability to control impulses, despite the negative consequences, are similar to hallmarks of other mental illnesses.

Signs of Drug or Alcohol Abuse

- Sudden onset of financial problems

- Valuables disappearing from the household
- Long periods of time in the bathroom
- Dilated or pinpointed pupils
- Needle marks
- Drug paraphernalia in the house

What’s the Difference between Use, Abuse, and Addiction?

“Use” refers to experimentation or low frequency, typically irregular, use of alcohol or illicit drugs. “Abuse” refers to regular and/or compulsive use of alcohol or illicit drugs. These terms distinguish on the basis of whether the use of alcohol or drugs has or has not become a significant feature of the person’s lifestyle. Clinicians diagnose substance abuse if, in a twelve-month period, a person is in one or more of the following situations related to drug use:

- Fails to meet obligations, such as missing work or school
- Engages in reckless activities, such as driving while intoxicated
- Encounters legal troubles, such as getting arrested
- Continues to use despite personal problems, such as a fight with a partner.

Addiction implies physiological dependence, is more severe and involves tolerance (increased need for the substance in order to achieve the desired altered state of consciousness) and withdrawal (mental or physical symptoms after stopping drug use).

The behavioral patterns are:

- Being unable to stop once using starts
- Exceeding self-imposed limits
- Curtailing time spent on other activities
- Spending excessive time using or getting drugs
- Taking a drug despite deteriorating health

How Does Dual Diagnosis Affect Families and Friends?

Dual diagnosis means the condition is especially complex and difficult to manage. Families with a dually diagnosed member may experience twice the problems of those whose family member has only one disorder.

Is Dual Diagnosis Common?

The combination of mental illness and substance abuse is so common that many clinicians who work with the mentally ill now expect to find it. Studies show that 50% of persons with mental illness also have a substance abuse problem. And more than half the persons with a substance abuse diagnosis also have a diagnosable mental illness.

What Causes These Disorders?

Mental health and addiction counselors understand that mental illness and substance abuse are biologically and physiologically based. Families may feel angry at the person and blame him for being foolish and weak-willed. They may feel hurt when the person breaks trust by lying or stealing. But it's important to realize that mental illness and substance abuse are diseases and that the person cannot take control of the problem without help.

What Kind of Treatment Works?

People with such difficult problems do not respond to simplistic advice like "just say no" or "snap out of it." Psychotherapy, medication and sometimes electro-convulsive therapy combined with appropriate self-help and other support groups help, but these individuals are still highly prone to relapse. Treatment programs designed only for substance abusers are not recommended for people who also have a mental illness. Confrontation without adequate support and encouragement for the use of appropriate medications compound the problems of mentally ill patients and may produce stress levels that make symptoms worse or cause relapse. Research has strongly indicated that to recover fully, a consumer with co-occurring disorder needs treatment for both problems -- focusing on one does not ensure the other will go away. Dual diagnosis services integrate assistance for each condition, helping people recover from both in one setting, at the same time.

What is a Better Approach?

Increasingly, the psychiatric and drug counseling communities agree that both disorders must be treated at the same time. Studies show that when mental illness and substance abuse are treated by the same treatment team, psychotic episodes and suicide

attempts decrease. The patient's denial is a central part of the problem. Dually diagnosed clients do not fit well into most Alcoholic Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous groups. Clients who develop positive social networks have a better chance of controlling their illnesses. Healthy recreational activities and peer relationships are extremely important.

What's the First Step in Treatment?

The presence of both disorders must be established by careful assessment. This may be difficult because the symptoms of one disorder can mimic the symptoms of the other. Once an assessment has confirmed a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse, professionals and family members should work together on a strategy for integrating care and motivating the client.

What Do Model Programs for Treating Mental Illness and Substance Abuse Look Like?

There are a growing number of model programs using the Integrated Dual Diagnosis Treatment (IDDT) strategies. Among other modalities, they have support groups similar to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Members support each other as they learn about the role of alcohol and drugs in their lives. They learn social skills and how to replace substance use with new thoughts and behaviors. They get help with concrete situations that arise because of mental illness. Several programs also have support groups for family members and friends.

To download NIDA's (National Institute of Drug Addiction) "The Science of Addiction"

<http://m.drugabuse.gov/publications/science-addiction>

For more information on mental illnesses – contact:

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