

facts about dual-diagnosis

Dual diagnosis refers to the co-occurrence of substance abuse with a mental illness. Substance abuse is a common problem among people with mental illness and, if undiagnosed, can interfere with treatment and recovery.

How common is it?

Mental illness and substance abuse often go hand-in-hand. They may occur at the same time, or one may develop before the other, in any case, it is important to recognize both conditions in order to effect the best possible treatment outcome.

According to the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration a significant percentage of the 1.5 to 2 million Americans with severe mental illness abuse substances, as compared to the general population.

People with serious mental illness are 4-5 times as likely to develop a substance abuse disorder as the general population.

Why is it so common?

When someone suffers from a mental illness, it is not uncommon for the sufferer to self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs to ease the symptoms. As use becomes more frequent, the person can become dependent upon the substance. Conversely, substance abuse can trigger symptoms of depression, anxiety, psychosis or suicidal thoughts. In addition, substance abuse which begins in adolescence and continues into adulthood may contribute to the development of emotional difficulties or psychiatric disorders.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosing a co-occurring substance abuse disorder can be a challenge for a number of reasons. As one of the most common symptoms of addiction is denial, an accurate self-report of alcohol or drug use may be difficult to attain. Also, some of the symptoms of addiction mimic those of certain mental illnesses, and vice-versa.

The best way to determine if there is a co-occurring disorder is to find out as much as possible about the person, and to conduct a thorough mental and physical health assessment that includes a substance abuse screening.

Treatment

Both conditions can be treated at the same time. However, the predominant diagnosis should be addressed first. If an addiction is present, the first step is to detoxify the patient if possible. This is important because accurate assessment of the nature and severity of a psychiatric disorder is difficult in the presence of alcohol or drug dependency.

Drug and alcohol rehabilitation can occur on an inpatient or outpatient basis. The best option for treatment can be determined by the patient and his or her treatment team. Following detoxification, regular counseling and attendance at a 12-step or other recovery support group should be included in the overall treatment plan. Attention to exercise, nutrition, housing and other lifestyle issues will also enhance recovery.

Only 19% of people with a serious mental illness and drug or alcohol dependency are treated for both disorders, and 29% are not treated for either problem. For people with less serious mental illnesses and substance dependence problems, the pattern of under-treatment is even worse. Seventy-one percent receive no treatment, and only 4% receive treatment for both disorders. (President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health)

Treatment outcomes are improved for both substance abuse and psychiatric disorders when the presence of both are detected and treated.