

Facts

Having a Dual Disorder or Diagnosis means that a person has both a mental illness and an alcohol or other drug use problem.

A person may have a mental illness first, then turn to alcohol or other drugs because of sadness, anxiety, or fear of other people. The use of alcohol and other drugs makes problems harder to solve and creates new ones, such as addiction.

On the other hand, a person may have an alcohol or other drug use problem first. Because the person uses alcohol or other drugs, the brain and other organs may be affected, making the person act differently and develop a mental illness over time.

To recover fully, the person needs treatment for both problems.

When someone has a dual diagnosis, many people are affected. Everyone involved may have problems with stress as a result of not knowing what will happen from one moment to the next. Family and friends may feel guilt, anger, fear, shame and hopelessness.

Some reports indicate that 37% of those who abuse alcohol and 53% of those who abuse drugs also have at least one serious mental illness. In addition, of all people who have a mental illness diagnosis, 29% abuse either alcohol or drugs.

Signs & Symptoms

Someone with a dual diagnosis may:

- Use alcohol or other drugs to try to control feelings or avoid problems.
- Need more alcohol or other drugs to get the same feeling.
- Try again and again to cut down or control use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Have mood swings from very happy to very sad or may feel sad for long periods.
- Be extremely angry.
- Lack interest in people or activities that used to be enjoyable.
- Talk about suicide.

Causes

It depends. Sometimes the psychiatric problem develops first. In an attempt to feel calmer, more energetic or happier, a person with emotional symptoms may drink or use drugs as “self-medication.” Frequent self-medication may eventually lead to physical or psychological dependency on alcohol or other drugs.

In other cases, the substance dependency is the primary condition. A person whose substance abuse problem has become severe may develop symptoms of a psychiatric disorder, i.e., depression, hallucinations, or suicidal thoughts or intentions.

Treatment

There are several different levels or intensities of care, including full hospitalization or inpatient treatment, partial hospitalization, and outpatient treatment. The nature and severity of the illness, the associated risks or complications, and the person’s treatment history are some of the things considered in determining the right level of care.

Helping Yourself

The most important way to help yourself is to acknowledge your problems and seek professional help. Depending on your circumstances, your treatment may include care as a patient in a hospital or other facility, outpatient services, counseling or taking part in treatment groups and self-help groups.

It is important to remember that recovery takes time, but once you get help you can expect to enjoy life more and feel better about yourself. Some tips to help your recovery are:

- Be honest with yourself and others. Admitting you have a problem is the first step.
- Get all the facts about your condition and planned treatment. If medications are indicated, find out about dosages and potential side effects.
- Carefully follow your treatment plan. Take medicine exactly as directed and keep all appointments.

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- Don't keep feelings to yourself. Share your worries with family, friends, your treatment team, or self-help group.

Helping Someone Else

Encourage the person to acknowledge the problems and seek help. If the person is reluctant, you may be able to help by making an appointment and offering to go with the person.

Education, counseling sessions, and support groups for the person's family are important parts of overall care. If someone you know has a dual diagnosis, learn all you can about the person's condition. If possible, talk to the person's health care provider and other care providers. Don't "enable" by making excuses or making it easy for the person to keep using alcohol or other drugs instead, offer support, patience, and understanding. Learn to recognize the warning signs of relapse and what to do if it occurs.

Learn the warning signs of suicide. The danger signals include previous suicide attempts, talking about death or suicide, planning for suicide, and depression. Anyone who is considering suicide needs immediate attention, preferably from a mental health professional or physician.

Keep in mind that you are not responsible for the person's condition. You need to find the right balance between helping your friend or family member and helping yourself. It's important to set aside time for yourself and continue to eat right, get enough rest, and exercise.

Sources:

National Institute of Mental Health

National Mental Health Association

For more information contact

Northern Lakes Community Mental Health
1-800-492-5742
(231) 922-4850

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
www.nami.org
(800) 950-6264

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov
(800) 421-4211 (depression info)
(888) 826-9438 (anxiety info)
(301) 443-4513 (other info)

National Mental Health Association
www.nmha.org
(800) 969-6642

The Center for Mental Health Services
www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/