

The Connection Between Mental Illness And Substance Abuse



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The connection between mental illness and substance abuse has been widely documented, in part because it's important to understand the ways both can affect the mind and behavior. Because certain disorders like depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia have symptoms that are alarmingly similar to those of substance abuse, it can be difficult to diagnose one or the other without a lengthy visit with a doctor or therapist.

Sometimes, individuals living with a mental illness will turn to [substances](#) to help cope with their feelings and behavior, especially if they are undiagnosed. This form of self-medication is dangerous, however, because certain drugs can cause people with a mental health disorder to experience one or more additional mental health issues.

“Mental illness and alcoholism or drug abuse interact in a complex dance. Mental illnesses can increase the risk for alcoholism or drug abuse, sometimes because of self-medicating. On the other hand, alcoholism can lead to significant anxiety and depression that may appear indistinguishable from a mental illness. Finally, one disorder can be worse than the other,” says [Dr. James Garbutt](#), a research scientist in alcohol studies.

[Symptoms](#) that may occur both with mental health disorders and substance abuse include:

- Isolation from family and friends
- Violent or angry outbursts
- Suddenly doing poorly in school or at work
- Loss of interest in things that once brought joy
- Too much or too little sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Physical changes, such as losing or gaining weight or not having good hygiene habits
- Frequently getting into trouble
- Engaging in risky behavior
- Short periods of elation or bursts of energy

It's important to remember that individuals battling a mental health disorder and substance abuse may not realize they need treatment. Offering to help them find a counselor or physician is one step towards getting them a good diagnosis, but they need to be willing to get help as well. Because some people are genetically inclined toward mental health issues, they may not know they are exhibiting behaviors that are symptoms of these issues until they are diagnosed.

"The substance is not really causing the mental health problem, but it can be a precipitating factor that causes the condition to manifest. In this respect, the mental health condition is already actively present when the substance abuse begins, but the patient just doesn't know it -- the problem is driving the addiction, it just hasn't yet been recognized or diagnosed," says [Dr. Alan Manevitz](#).

Diagnosis and treatment are necessary, but they will not be easy. Getting someone with a substance abuse problem through recovery can be physically and emotionally painful for the individual, leaving the feelings they were trying to repress with the substance exposed. They may feel angry much of the time or experience stress and anxiety from coping with their raw emotions. However, it is imperative that both conditions be treated at the same time, and it can be achieved. It will simply take time and patience.

Adam Cook started AddictionHub.org after losing a friend to substance abuse and suicide. He is interested in helping people find the necessary resources to save their lives from addiction. His mission is aligned with AddictionHub's, to help people find support with issues relating to addiction.