

Dual Diagnosis

What is Dual Diagnosis?

A person who has both an alcohol or drug problem and an emotional/psychiatric problem is said to have a dual diagnosis. To recover fully, the person needs treatment for both problems.

How Common Is Dual Diagnosis?

Dual diagnosis is more common than you might imagine. According to a report published by the Journal of the American Medical Association:

- Thirty-seven percent of alcohol abusers and fifty-three percent of drug abusers also have at least one serious mental illness.
- Of all people diagnosed as mentally ill, 29 percent abuse either alcohol or drugs.

What Kind of Mental or Emotional Problems are Seen in People with a Dual Diagnosis?

The following psychiatric problems are common to occur in dual diagnosis - i.e., in tandem with alcohol or drug dependency.

- Depressive disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder.
- Anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias.
- Other psychiatric disorders, such as schizophrenia and personality disorders.

Which Develops First - Substance Abuse or the Emotional Problem?

It depends. Often the psychiatric problem develops first. In an attempt to feel calmer, peppier, or more cheerful, a person with emotional symptoms may drink or use drugs; doctors call this “self-medication.” Frequent self-medication may eventually lead to physical or psychological dependency on alcohol or drugs. If it does, the person then suffers from not just one problem, but two. In adolescents, however, drug or alcohol abuse may merge and continue into adulthood, which may contribute to the development of emotional difficulties or psychiatric disorders.

In other cases, alcohol or drug dependency is the primary condition. A person whose substance abuse problem has become severe may develop symptoms of a psychiatric disorder: perhaps episodes of depression, fits of rage, hallucinations, or suicide attempts.

How Can a Physician Tell Whether the Person’s Primary Problem is Substance Abuse or an Emotional Disorder?

At the initial examination, it may be difficult to tell. Since many symptoms of severe substance abuse mimic other psychiatric conditions, the person must go through a withdrawal from alcohol and/or drugs before the physician can accurately assess whether there’s an underlying psychiatric If a

Person Does Have Both an Alcohol/Drug Problem and an Emotional Problem, Which Should Be Treated First?

Ideally, both problems should be treated simultaneously. For any substance abuser, however, the first step in treatment must be detoxification - a period of time during which the body is allowed to cleanse

What You Need to Know...



itself of alcohol or drugs. Ideally, detoxification should take place under medical supervision. It can take a few days to a week or more, depending on what substances the person abused and for how long.

Until recently, alcoholics and drug addicts dreaded detoxification because it meant a painful and sometimes life-threatening “cold turkey” withdrawal. Now, doctors are able to give hospitalized substance abusers carefully chosen medications which can substantially ease withdrawal symptoms. Thus, when detoxification is done under medical supervision, it’s safer and less traumatic problem also.

What Is Next After Detoxification?

Once detoxification is completed, it’s time for dual treatment; rehabilitation for the alcohol or drug problem and treatment for the psychiatric problem.

Rehabilitation for a substance abuse problem usually involves individual and group psychotherapy, education about alcohol and drugs, exercise, proper nutrition, and participation in a 12-step recovery program such as Alcoholics Anonymous. The idea is not just to stay off booze and drugs, but to learn to enjoy life without these “crutches.”

Treatment for a psychiatric problem depends upon the diagnosis. For most disorders, individual and group therapy as well as medications are recommended. Expressive therapies and education about the particular psychiatric condition are often useful adjuncts. A support group of other people who are recovering from the same condition may also prove highly beneficial. Adjunct treatment, such as occupational or expressive therapy, can help individuals better understand and communicate their feelings or develop better problem-solving or decision-making skills.

Must a Dual Diagnosis Patient Be Treated in a Hospital?

Not necessarily. The nature and severity of the illness, the associated risks or complications, and the person’s treatment history are some of the facts considered in determining the appropriate level of care. There are several different levels or intensities of care including full hospitalization or inpatient treatment, partial hospitalization, and outpatient treatment.

What is the Role of the Patient’s Family in Treatment?

With both rehabilitation for substance abuse and treatment for a psychiatric problem, education, counseling sessions, and support groups for the patient’s family are important aspects of overall care. The greater the family’s understanding of the problems, the higher the chances the patient will have a lasting recovery.

For more information, contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at 414.276.3122, or via Email: info@mhawisconsin.org.

Mental Health America is a United Way of Greater Milwaukee agency.



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