

Dual Disorder



A dual disorder (or sometimes called a dual diagnosis) is one that includes a mental illness diagnosis and a chemical dependency diagnosis at the same time.

Either substance abuse or mental illness can develop first and sometimes it may appear that they came on together. A person with a mental health diagnosis may turn to drugs and/or alcohol to self-medicate, an unhealthy way of coping with their mental health symptoms.

Abusing substances can also lead to mental health issues when the effects those drugs have on a person's mood, thoughts or behaviors become erratic or dysfunctional.

It is common to have a dual diagnosis?

Research shows that roughly one third of the people who have a mental illnesses and about half of the people living with severe mental illnesses also struggle with a substance abuse problem and diagnosis (NIMH, 2014). Males tend to have more dual diagnoses than do females. Dual diagnosis can be given at any age, but typically not under the age of 15.

Symptoms

The symptoms for a dual diagnosis are the same for each individual diagnosis, they just occur at the same time. For example, someone with a major depressive disorder will have symptoms of low energy, no interest in things, a change in appetite, sleep, feel hopeless and can have thoughts of suicide. Someone who has bipolar disorder will have the same depressive symptoms but will also have periods of mania or excessive energy, lack of need for sleep or eating, they might talk really fast or feel they are on top of the world and lack concentration or an ability to complete tasks. Someone who is chemically dependent might withdraw from family, have behavior changes, engage in high risk behaviors (e.g. sharing needles), drink alcohol to intoxication, blackout or passing out and they will develop a tolerance to the substance they are using. **When both a mental illness and a substance abuse diagnosis occur at the same time, the symptoms are the same they just happen together.**

Taking the first step?

There are some screening assessments that professionals have to identify people at risk for drug and alcohol abuse, as well as determine the level of care that they need if dually diagnosed.

The most common method of treatment for dual diagnosis happens when a person receives professional healthcare for both their mental illness and substance abuse concurrently. Sometimes, however, it is imperative to treat the substance abuse issue first, to clear the mind and body of the substance and then treat the mental health condition. In detox a person is monitored by a medical staff for a period of 3-7 days.

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Inpatient/Partial Hospitalization/Day Treatment

A person who has a serious mental illness and chemical dependency diagnosis might initially need inpatient treatment to keep themselves safe and away from chemicals. Once stabilized, they might move to a less intensive form of treatment called partial hospitalization where they go to meetings during the day, but are home at night and on weekends. As treatment continues, a step-down in care to day treatment where they might attend treatment for half the day and the other half they are in school, at work or are at home.

Supportive housing, like group homes or sober houses or residential treatment, is another type of residential care that is helpful for people who are new to recovery.

Medications and Therapy

Medications can be helpful for treating a number of mental illnesses. Antidepressants, neuroleptics, anti-anxiety medications, etc. are often prescribed by a psychiatrist after a thorough assessment. Some medications are also helpful for people recovering from substance abuse, in particular to help the person with withdrawal symptoms.

Psychotherapy is another component to treatment for someone with a dual diagnosis. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a research based program found to be effective in helping people with dual diagnosis learn how to cope with their illness and to change their patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. Therapy can be done individually, in groups and as family therapy where the focus is on the diagnosis and behaviors impacting those around the person who is diagnosed.

Support Groups

Dealing with a dual diagnosis can be overwhelming. Support groups help people by allowing them to share information and experiences in a structured or semi-structured format, share resources and tips on what works when trying to treat a dual diagnosis. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are examples of support groups.