

Mental Illness and Substance Abuse

According to a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA):

- Roughly 50 percent of individuals with severe mental disorders are affected by some form of substance abuse or dependence.
- Thirty-seven percent of people who are dependent upon or abuse alcohol and 53 percent of people who are dependent upon or abuse street drugs also have at least one serious mental illness.

The Consequences

Those with untreated co-occurring disorders have a greater likelihood of violence, failure to respond to treatment and higher risk of illness, homelessness, incarceration and death.

Having co-occurring disorders can impact all aspects of daily life and over all functioning by causing problems with memory, attention and decision making. It can also affect all the organs in the human body.

Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol dependence is what people think of when they think of alcoholism. It is a disease that occurs when a person has a strong urge to drink, physical dependence on alcohol, withdrawal symptoms from alcohol or the need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to experience a high.

Recovered individuals report that the craving an alcoholic feels for alcohol can be as strong and the need for food or water. An alcoholic will drink despite serious family, health or legal problems.



Alcohol Abuse Effects on Health

Short-term

- Unintentional injuries, accidents and risk of domestic violence
- Risky sexual behaviors and impaired judgment
- Alcohol poisoning which can lead to death
- Complex medication interactions
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome when pregnant

Long-term

- Neurological problems including dementia, stroke and loss of nerve feeling
- Increased risk of high blood pressure, heart attack and other cardiovascular problems
- Cancer of the mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, colon and breast
- Liver diseases such as alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis
- Gastrointestinal problems, including pancreatitis and gastritis
- Higher risk of premature death

Drug Abuse

Drug abuse is the habitual use of illegal, prescription or over-the-counter drugs for purposes other than they were intended. Drug abuse may substantially injure the user and interfere with social, physical, emotional and job-related functioning. Drug dependence is thought of as the body's physical addictive craving for the drugs.

Getting Help

There are many resources and support available for conquering addiction. As you work to put a plan in place, educate yourself about medication options, treatment facilities, outpatient behavioral treatment and community-based social support.

Some self-help groups are sophisticated enough to help people achieve sobriety while accepting a psychiatric condition and the need for psychiatric medications. However, some AA groups have historically discouraged

dually diagnosed persons from taking psychiatric medications. It can be useful to shop the meetings in your area to find one that best meets your individual needs. If you are taking medications for a mental illness and utilize AA support, be sure that your sponsor understands and respects your medication choices.

Drug Abuse Effects on Health

- Worsening psychiatric symptoms
- Cardiovascular conditions ranging from abnormal heart rate to heart attacks; injected drugs can lead to collapsed veins and infections of the blood vessels and heart valves
- Nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain
- Significant liver damage or liver failure
- Seizures, stroke and widespread brain damage that impact all aspects of daily life by causing problems with memory, attention and decision-making
- Global body changes such as dramatic changes in appetite

Your best ally in identifying help may be your primary care provider. He or she can refer you to specialized care by recommending someone with additional addiction training or to a treatment facility.

Publicly funded treatment centers are available. For more information on these facilities in your state, please call (800) 662-HELP or visit www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov.

- Alcoholics Anonymous (www.aa.org) is a free, 12-step organization that has helped millions of individuals.
- Al-Anon (www.al-anon.alateen.org) is a program for families to help them learn detachment and to separate their responsibility from that of the addicted person.
- Al-Ateen (www.al-anon.alateen.org) is a program geared for adolescents who have addicted family members.
- Smart Recovery (www.smartrecovery.org) is a sobriety support program that does not share the religious focus of AA, but is rooted in science.
- Double Trouble groups (www.doubletroubleinrecovery.org) offer self-help support for individuals living with both mental illness and addiction.

Do You Need Help?

- Do you drink or use drugs alone or in secret?
- Are you unable to limit the amount of alcohol you drink?
- Do you find yourself unable to remember conversations or commitments?
- Have you lost interest in activities or hobbies that you used to enjoy?
- Do you feel a need or compulsion to drink or take drugs?
- Are you irritable when your usual drinking time nears, especially if alcohol is not available?
- Do you keep alcohol or drugs hidden in strange places around your home, at work or in your car?
- Have you built up a tolerance to that you need an increasing number of drinks or a drug to feel the effects you want?
- Do you need a drink or get high as soon as you wake up in the morning?
- Do you feel guilty about your drinking/drug use?
- Do you think you need to cut back on your drinking/drug use?
- Are you annoyed when other people comment or criticize your drinking/drug-use habits?

If you answered "yes" to two or more of these questions, consider seeking help.

NAMI Hearts & Minds program is an online, interactive, educational initiative promoting the idea of wellness for individuals living with mental illness. This Fact Sheet is offered for informational purposes only. It does not intend to recommend specific treatment or strategies. Individuals should always engage with their health care provider before addressing addiction.

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For more information about co-occurring mental illness, substance abuse, alcoholism or the NAMI Hearts & Minds program, visit

