

UNDERSTANDING CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS

A Guide for Families

Co-occurring disorders, also known as dual diagnoses, refer to the presence of both a **mental health disorder** and a **substance use disorder** in an individual. This raises the complexity of diagnosing and treating a family member. Often, symptoms of mental health problems can mimic substance use problems and vice versa.

The Link Between Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders

Research has shown a significant link between mental health disorders and substance use disorders. People with substance use problems may develop depression, anxiety, psychosis, and other problems related to mental health. Individuals with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, trauma, ADHD, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia are more at risk of developing substance use disorders. This can be due to various factors, including self-medication, where individuals use alcohol and other drugs to reduce symptoms of their mental illness. However, substance use can worsen mental health symptoms, creating a vicious cycle that complicates treatment.

Questions to Ask Before Considering an Opioid Prescription

Certain medications, including opioids, pose a risk of misuse and addiction. Opioids include prescription pain relievers like OxyContin, Vicodin, and Percocet. They not only relieve physical pain but can help numb emotional pain. Their use by a person with a mental health or substance use disorder or co-occurring disorder can quickly lead to dependence and addiction, since they may be seen as a solution to feeling depressed, anxious, or worried.

If you or your loved one has been diagnosed with any of these conditions or if you suspect one, it's important to approach opioid prescriptions with caution.

Here are some key questions to discuss with your health care provider:

1. Is there a non-opioid alternative? Often, non-opioid medications or other therapies can effectively manage pain without the risk of addiction.
2. If opioids are necessary, what are the risks associated with them, given my (or my loved one's) mental health and substance use problems? Understanding the specific risks can help in making an informed decision.
3. What signs of addiction should I watch for? Being aware of early signs of dependence or misuse can prompt timely intervention.
4. How will this medication interact with existing treatments for mental health and substance use? Ensuring that all aspects of treatment are compatible is essential for overall health.

The Prevalence of Co-Occurring Disorders

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), about half of those who experience a mental illness will also experience a substance use disorder at some point in their lives, and vice versa. This high rate of occurrence raises the importance of recognizing the problems and finding integrated treatment programs.

The Benefits of Integrated Care

For individuals with co-occurring disorders, traditional treatment approaches that address only one aspect of the disorder are often insufficient. Integrated care, which simultaneously addresses both mental health and substance use problems, has been shown to be more effective. This holistic approach can include:

- **Comprehensive Assessment:** Evaluating both mental health and substance use patterns to tailor an individualized treatment plan
- **Coordinated Treatment:** Collaboration among mental health professionals, addiction specialists, and primary care providers to ensure all aspects of the patient's health are addressed
- **Behavioral Therapies:** Evidence-based therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) that address the underlying issues contributing to both disorders
- **Medication Management:** Careful use of medications to manage symptoms of both disorders without worsening substance use issues

Supporting a Loved One with a Co-Occurring Disorder

Families play a critical role in the recovery process. Here are some ways to support your loved one:

- **Educate Yourself:** Learn about co-occurring disorders to understand what your loved one is experiencing and how best to help.
- **Encourage Treatment:** Support your loved one in seeking and sticking with integrated treatment options.
- **Create a Supportive Environment:** Provide a stable and understanding home environment to reduce stress and triggers that might lead to substance use.
- **Practice Self-Care:** Caring for someone with a co-occurring disorder can be challenging. Ensure you take time for your own mental and physical health.

By understanding the link between substance use and mental illness, recognizing the prevalence and risks, asking critical questions about treatments, and supporting integrated care, families can play a pivotal role in helping their loved ones **navigate the path to recovery.**

Additional Resources

RxAware: <https://drugfree.org/rxaware>

Helping with co-occurring disorders:
<https://drugfree.org/article/helping-with-co-occurring-disorders>

Co-occurring disorder resources:
<https://drugfree.org/article/co-occurring-disorder-resources>