

Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders

Nobody plans to become addicted to drugs or alcohol, yet it happens often. Plenty of people can enjoy the occasional alcoholic drink or take prescribed pain medications and still lead a healthy life. But addiction develops slowly over time, which is why it can be easy to miss the early warning signs.

When a person's frequent use of alcohol or drugs starts to cause health problems, or the inability to take care of responsibilities, it may be that a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is present.

How substance use ties to mental health

It's common for SUDs to occur simultaneously with mental health issues like anxiety and depression. In fact, one can lead to the other. Certain drugs can cause people to experience symptoms of mental illness. A person may also misuse drugs or alcohol as a way to self-medicate for a mental health problem.

SUDs and mental health problems share some underlying causes such as changes in brain composition, genetic vulnerabilities and early exposure to stress or trauma.

How chemical dependency occurs

Chemical dependency happens when someone becomes physically and psychologically dependent on a substance. At first, the chemical may seem harmless, but over time, a person craves larger and more frequent doses of the drug. The person's body and mind may become completely consumed by this dependency. The dependency is truly a physical and psychological cause, rather than a flaw or weakness in character.

When it's a problem

Excessive substance use can put a person at risk of losing their job, dropping out of school, physical and mental illness, and even injury or death. Warning signs of substance misuse and the need for professional help include:

- Sudden drop in attendance or work performance
- Slurred speech or inappropriate emotional responses
- Neglecting responsibilities and risky behavior
- Sudden weight change
- Severe dental problems
- Dilated or constricted pupils, red or glassy eyes
- Redness around the chin, upper lip and nose from inhalants
- Open sores on the face and arms
- Agitation, rapid speech, tremors, paranoia or aggressiveness

Treatment

SUD is very serious, but recovery is very possible. However, there isn't any single approach to treatment that works for everyone. Because of the complexity of the disorder, the most effective treatment should be individualized. Some types of treatment include self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous or intensive outpatient programs, which may include group therapy and family involvement.

Early intervention can have a significant impact on recovery. If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use, reach out for help. Talk to your doctor or a behavioral health professional about which treatment is best for you. Call the number on your health insurance card, or if you're employed, seek help from your Employee Assistance Program.

Sources: MentalHealth.gov; Life Advantages; The StayWell Company, LLC