

Masking the Pain or Creating It?

Substance Abuse and Mental Illness

Substance use/misuse and mental illness individually create serious problems for a person's overall health and relationships. Combined, substance abuse and mental illness can create far more complex problems in an individual's life. Many people do not realize that there can often be a close connection between substance use/misuse and mental illness. Over the course of their lives, 30% of people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness will also experience a substance use/misuse problem. As well, 53% of people diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder will also experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives.

When a mental illness and a substance use/misuse problem are experienced in conjunction with one another, it is called a concurrent disorder. This is also sometimes referred to as comorbidity. Comorbidity means that there is a health problem in a person that exists simultaneously, but independently, with another health problem. It is also used to indicate that there is a health problem which is caused by, or causes, or is related to another health problem from which the individual is suffering. An example of a person who has a concurrent disorder may be someone who has a substance use/misuse problem, such as an addiction to sleeping pills, and also has a psychiatric disorder such as depression or anxiety disorder.

The psychiatric disorders with which substance use/misuse is most commonly diagnosed are:

- Anxiety disorders – 24% of people with anxiety disorders will experience a substance use/misuse problem in their lifetime.
- Depression – 27% of people with depression will experience a substance use/misuse problem in their lifetime.
- Bipolar disorder – 56% of people with bipolar disorder will experience a substance use/misuse problem in their lifetime.
- Schizophrenia – 47% of people with schizophrenia will experience a substance use/misuse problem in their lifetime.

So what is it about mental illness that causes substance use/misuse, or vice versa? There are several things that can potentially cause a concurrent disorder to occur. First of all, many people who have a mental illness use drugs and other substances to “self-medicate.” For these people, using or misusing substances gives them the rush,

euphoria or escape that makes them feel better. This can eventually lead to addiction or dependence. Another way in which a person could potentially end up with a concurrent disorder is from the physiological effects of a drug. This means that if a person is using drugs, side-effects of their drug use may induce mental illness. As well, substance use/misuse may disrupt the relationships in a drug user's life, and have a serious impact on a person's social and work life. For example, an individual's drug use decreases their performance at work or their attendance, and they get fired. Then, losing the job could potentially create a high degree of depression for the individual. Common biological factors, traumatic events, physical or emotional trauma could all potentially cause mental illness to coexist with a substance use/misuse problem.

It is important to understand that mental illness and substance use/misuse can coexist, and that aspects of substance use/misuse can contribute to, or cause mental illness and vice versa. It is also important to educate people about the relationship and coexistence of substance use/misuse and mental illness so that individuals can more clearly see the signs of each and more easily identify the problem and find help. It has been shown that the prevention of substance use/misuse can also help in preventing mental illness. As well, catching mental illness early could also help in preventing a future substance abuse problem.