

Complications of Co-occurring Disorders

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Substance use disorders often involve co-occurring emotional, mental health, and behavioral health issues that complicate the clinical picture of becoming and maintaining abstinent from chemicals. This combination can make both conditions more challenging to treat, recover from, and manage any non-remitting symptoms in recovery. There are a number of important considerations regarding the co-morbidity of mental health issues and substance use disorder.

Comorbidity is simply the presence of two or more disorders in an individual simultaneously. Some of the most common co-occurring disorders with substance use disorder are depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, attention deficit disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Behavioral addictions such as gambling, sexual, spending, gaming, social media, and other compulsive electronic use are also common.

Many people with mental health issues turn to drugs or alcohol as a way to self-medicate their symptoms. They may use substances to alleviate feelings of depression, anxiety, or emotional pain. It is often difficult to determine which came first, the mental health issues or the substance use disorder. Each side has a bidirectional effect on the other, exacerbating and interfering with recovery efforts.

Dual Diagnosis:

Dual diagnosis treatment is a "best practices" approach that addresses both addiction and mental health issues simultaneously. It's crucial to treat both conditions simultaneously because the interactive effect of both conditions makes an integrated approach the most effective to maximize the best outcomes.

The contributions of each disorder create amplified risks for mental health and substance use problems. The overlapping risk factors, such as genetic predisposition, trauma, and environmental influences, increase the risk of having the disorders, relapse, and complicated recovery trajectories.

Effects on Treatment:

Mental health issues can complicate addiction treatment. Symptoms of mental health conditions may interfere with a person's ability to engage in treatment, follow a recovery plan, or maintain abstinence from drugs or alcohol. Substance use issues complicate treatment and recovery trajectories for people who are dealing with mental health problems.

Common challenges arise when individuals discontinue their mental health medications to enable drinking. Some may substitute alcohol or other drugs, favoring their effects over prescribed medications that may have side effects. Engaging in self-medicating endeavors and participating in other self-sabotaging behaviors is another hurdle. These actions collectively interfere with treatment compliance and hinder the overall recovery process.

Relapse:

Individuals with co-occurring mental health and addiction issues are at an increased risk of relapse. Unaddressed mental health symptoms can trigger a return to substance use. Alcohol and other mood-altering drugs interfere with the therapeutic properties of prescribed medications and contribute to treatment non-compliance.

Integrated Care: The most effective approach to treating co-occurring addiction and mental health issues is integrated care. This treatment approach involves comprehensive treatment methods, including psychiatry, psychotherapy, counseling, medication, and support for both the addiction and the mental health condition.

Evidence-Based Therapies:

Co-occurring treatment approaches help individuals develop coping strategies and improve their emotional well-being. Best practices approaches involve challenging cognitive distortions common to addiction and mental health issues.

Support Groups:

Support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) often play a vital role in addiction recovery. These groups provide a support system and a sense of belonging, which can be beneficial for people with co-occurring disorders.

Family and Social Support:

The involvement of family and friends is crucial in the recovery process. They can provide emotional support, encourage treatment compliance, and help manage mental health issues.

It's essential for individuals struggling with co-occurring disorders to seek specialized professional help for their specific needs to achieve the best chances of recovery and long-term well-being.

Co-occurring disorders present additional challenges when trying to transition into recovery. The "Unlocking Recovery: Co-Occurring Disorders Transition Worksheet" can assist with making that transition, and maintaining an integrated approach to continuing recovery.