

## **Dual Diagnosis, The Complicated Disorder**

Many people have co-occurring disorders, or an addiction along with diagnosed mental health issues. I just thank my lucky stars that I am fortunate enough not to have had this difficult and complicated diagnosis. A person with co-occurring disorders presents a challenge for healthcare professionals to properly diagnose and treat DD. To be specific, co-occurring disorders is when someone experiences a mental illness and a substance disorder simultaneously. Either disorder, substance use or mental illness, can develop first. You may hear the healthcare professionals refer to the disorder as co-occurring disorder, coexisting disorder, dual disorder, dual diagnosis issues, or concurrent disorders. People experiencing a mental health condition may turn to alcohol or other drugs as a form of self-medication to improve the mental health symptoms they experience. However, research shows that alcohol and other drugs worsen the symptoms of mental illness.

The National Survey on Drug Use states that 9.2 million US adults experienced both mental illness and a substance use disorder last year alone (2019). With these statistics, one can only imagine how difficult it must be for the mental health professional to cope with this devastating illness.

Many combinations of dual diagnosis can occur, and the symptoms vary widely. Mental health clinics are starting to use alcohol and drug screening tools to help identify people at risk for drug and alcohol abuse. Symptoms of mental health conditions can also vary greatly. Warning signs such as extreme mood changes, confused thinking, difficulty concentrating, avoiding friends and social activities are very common in all of the mental health categories.

The best treatment for dual diagnosis is integrated intervention, where a patient receives care for both their diagnosed mental illness and substance abuse. In the past it was believed that having both a mental illness and substance abuse was untreatable. That has now been proven to be untrue. You and your treatment provider should understand the ways that each condition affects the other and how your treatment can be most effective. The treatment plan will not be the same for everyone but does have some common methods used as part of the treatment plan.

Detoxification must first be addressed. Monitoring patients 24-7 is necessary for up to seven days. After the detox has been addressed, a sober environment is necessary for the patient to be in a safe recovery facility. Therapy is also necessary for an effective dual diagnosis treatment plan. Medications are also helpful in treating patients with mental illness. Last, but not least, support groups are very helpful for people who need to identify with others who share the same diagnosis. I am a true testament of how support groups play a significant role in mental health recovery. Check out our website at [www.iamh.org](http://www.iamh.org).

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