

Dual Diagnosis: Mental Illness & Substance Abuse

By now, most people familiar with mental health services have heard the term “dual diagnosis”. What does this mean? Consumers are usually familiar with the diagnosis that helps describe their psychiatric condition. This diagnosis may be schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, or a number of other diagnoses that help providers understand the different kinds of emotional or psychological experiences that people have. There are even times when a psychiatric diagnosis may change. As providers and clinicians get to know someone better, or as symptoms change because of helpful treatment, they and the client may decide that another diagnosis better describes the experiences the individual receiving treatment has had or has. Sometimes clients may even receive two psychiatric diagnoses. But this is not what is meant by “dual diagnosis”.

In the field of mental health and substance abuse services, “dual diagnosis” means that an individual has two separate but very interrelated diagnosis:

1. A psychiatric diagnosis (at least one) and
2. A substance abuse diagnosis (which may include both drugs and alcohol).

Because the symptoms of the psychiatric diagnosis can influence and affect the use of substances, and because the use of substances can influence and affect the symptoms of the psychiatric diagnosis, the two can interact in unexpected and hurtful ways. It is important to know that both conditions can be successfully treated, usually with a coordinated treatment plan that includes both psychiatric and substance abuse treatment interventions. Providers and clinicians need to be aware of the importance of treating both conditions, and may suggest special programs or groups to help consumers work on the two needs

Consumers, family members, friends and clinicians should be aware that some of the warning signs associated with having dual treatment health needs are :

- Use of substances to control feelings or problems.
- The use of more and more substances over time to experience the same feelings.
- Feelings of sadness for long periods of time.
- Extremely angry feelings.
- Mood swings from very happy to very sad.
- Trying again and again to cut down on substance use, but being unable to.
- Lack of interest in people or activities that used to be enjoyable.
- Thinking of hurting oneself.

People who are seeking recovery from experiencing dual conditions need to know that it takes time, patience, and a positive attitude. Other things that help are:

- Honesty with oneself about substance use.
- Seeking information from all providers about the condition.
- Carefully following the treatment plan that providers and the consumer develop together.
- Sharing worries and concerns with trusted family and friends and the team of providers.
- Finding a self-help recovery group that the individual feels comfortable taking part in.

With time and persistence, dual diagnosis can be treated effectively. There are many people and organizations that are devoted to developing new and better ways to treat the combined difficulties of a mental health condition and substance abuse treatment needs.

Fisher, Bill. (1996) *What is Dual Diagnosis?* Continuum of Care Inc.