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Health & Wellness

There's A Connection Between Addiction And Mental Health

by Kimberly Zapata | August 14, 2021

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From depression and anxiety to drug and alcohol use, mental health struggles are common. In fact, nearly **44 million Americans are affected by mental health conditions** each year. But did you know there is an overlap between addiction and mental illness? It's true. Approximately 9 million people have co-occurring disorders. Yet most go untreated. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, only 7 percent of these individuals will get treatment for both conditions. Why? Because of shame, stigma, and misdiagnosis. Many with co-existing conditions suffer in silence.

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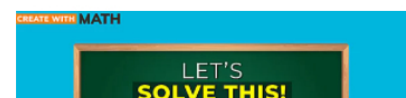
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important to note that while there is a strong connection between substance abuse and mental health issues, substance use usually does not lead to mental health issues. Rather, it is a symptom of a pre-existing condition”

Now I have witnessed the effects of comorbidity — or co-occurrence — firsthand. My mother struggled with her mental health for years, wrestling with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and OCD. Soon after my daughter was born, she began using alcohol to self-medicate. She numbed the pain, and (quite literally) drowned out her problems. And she did so for years. Ultimately, both conditions would claim her life. She was 65. But that’s not all. I live with anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, and PTSD and — when I am manic — I overindulge. I take shots, carelessly and recklessly. I drink until I black out. And it turns out I am not alone.

“Many people who suffer from mental health issues slip into addiction in an attempt to self-medicate using drugs or alcohol,” Cidambi adds. “For example, it is estimated that 30% of people who suffer from major depressive disorder do not benefit from antidepressants and many turn to street drugs or alcohol in order to address their depression.”

But that isn’t the only cause. Some evidence suggests that addictions and mental illnesses are caused by underlying brain defects, an article on VeryWell Mind explains. That, or exposure to trauma early in life.

As for the symptoms of addiction and mental illness, there is overlap — some of the symptoms of addiction mirror those of well-known mental health conditions.

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“Addiction brings about behavioral, physical, and social changes,” Cidambi explains. Some individuals will experience a drop in work or school performance. Many addicts isolate and engage in risky behaviors, and changes in appetite and sleep patterns are classic behavioral signs. Mood swings are also common.

“Physical signs include inappropriate clothing (long sleeves in summer), sudden weight loss or weight gain, disheveled appearance, tremors, slurred speech and impaired coordination,” Cidambi adds. “Some social changes including changing friends, disengaging from hobbies, and difficulty managing money.”

Mental health conditions, on the other hand, can produce a wide range of symptoms, including sadness, apathy, irritability, restlessness, trouble concentrating, and a general feeling of being on edge. However, many of the symptoms of mental illness are the same as those of addiction.

“Mood swings, feelings of hopelessness, appetite and weight changes, racing thoughts, risk taking, and thoughts of grandiosity are signs of a mental health condition,” Cidambi says. And many living with mental illness find it affects their school, work, and social life.

But for those struggling with both difficulties there is help and hope. Mental health-related



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But for those struggling with both difficulties, there is help and hope. Mental health-related conditions can be treated, as can addiction. You do not have to suffer alone.

"Since underlying mental health issues increase the probability of substance abuse later in life, mental health issues need to be addressed as soon as possible," Cidambi tells Scary Mommy. "This can be done through a combination of talk therapy and medication. For addiction treatment to be successful, mental health issues need to be addressed adequately — as untreated, or sub-optimally treated, mental health issues can lead back to substance abuse."

The good news is, both issues can (and should) be addressed simultaneously, and patients often see the best outcome when they receive integrated treatment. It's a long, hard road, but the payoff — a healthier, happier you — is worth the work.

If you or someone you love is living with addiction and/or a mental health condition, know this: There is help and hope. You are not alone. For more information about treatment, visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [website](#) or call their helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

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