

Dual Diagnosis: Adolescents with Co-occurring Brain Disorders & Substance Use Disorders

(Easy Reading Version)



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Using drugs is called a substance use disorder. Teens that use drugs or alcohol often have a mental illness like depression or anxiety. Having two disorders (a mental illness and a substance use disorder) is called dual diagnosis. Dual diagnosis is very common.

What causes these disorders?

Different kinds of mental illnesses are caused by different things. Sometimes a teenager feels bad and uses drugs or alcohol to try to feel better. This can lead to an addiction or dependence on that substance. Sometimes, a teenager starts experimenting with drugs or alcohol and this causes brain changes that develop into a mental illness. Often, we aren't sure which one came first.

Why is it so hard to get help for dual diagnosis?

There are many programs to help with substance use. There are also many programs to help with mental illnesses. There are not a lot of programs to treat substance use and mental illness at the same time. People with dual diagnosis need to treat mental illness and substance use together.

What doesn't help people with dual diagnosis?

- Saying things like "Just say no"
- Shaming or trying to "scare them straight"
- Treatment programs that are just for using drugs
- Treatment programs that are just for mental illnesses

What does help people with dual diagnosis?

- Therapy
- Medication
- Programs that treat mental illnesses and substance use disorders together
- Support groups

If your teen has dual diagnosis:

- Encourage your child to go to support groups
- Don't nag, preach, or lecture
- Don't say, "if you loved me, you would stop doing drugs." It is like saying "If you loved me, you would not have diabetes."
- Set rules and follow through. They still need boundaries and consequences for their behavior.
- Help your teen join after-school activities. Working part-time or volunteering can also help your teen
- Don't expect your child to get better right away
- Give love, support, and understanding
- Get support for yourself: go to a formal support group, talk to a friend, or take time for yourself.
- Remember that recovery is possible

See more: <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Related-Conditions/Dual-Diagnosis>

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