



# UNDERSTANDING CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS

Addressing mental health and substance use issues in tandem can be a vital and life-saving strategy.

## LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!



# WHAT ARE CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS?

Co-occurring disorders take place when a person experiences both:

- **A mental health condition**
  - Such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, bipolar disorder, etc.
- **A substance use disorder**
  - Alcohol or other drug use.

**These conditions often interact with and worsen each other, making recovery more complex—but absolutely possible with the right care.**

# THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

Mental health and substance use are **deeply intertwined**. Unwanted symptoms associated with undiagnosed and/or untreated mental health issues may exacerbate an individual's use of mind and mood-altering substances.

Over time, substance use can:

- **Worsen** mental health symptoms
- **Trigger** new mental health challenges
- **Interfere** with effective treatment

That said, untreated mental illness can increase the risk of developing or returning to substance use.

**This cycle can feel difficult to break—but integrated treatment makes a meaningful difference.**

# **WHY TREATING BOTH TOGETHER IS ESSENTIAL**

Treating only one condition while ignoring the other often leads to:

- Higher risk of relapse
- Increased hospitalizations or crisis episodes
- Poorer overall outcomes

## An integrated or simultaneous treatment approach:

- Reduces relapse risk
- Improves treatment engagement
- Supports long-term recovery
- Promotes whole-person wellness

**Recovery is not just about stopping substance use—it's about improving mental health, stability, and overall quality of life.**

# POTENTIAL SIGNS OF CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS

A person may be experiencing co-occurring disorders if they:

- Use substances to manage anxiety, depression, trauma, etc.
- Struggle emotionally when not using substances
- Experience repeated relapses during treatment
- Have difficulty managing daily responsibilities
- Feel shame, hopelessness, or confusion about their health

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# INTEGRATED TREATMENT

Effective integrated services may involve:

- Mental health therapy (individual or group)
- Substance use treatment
- Trauma-informed care
- Medication management
- Peer support and recovery services
- Case management and wraparound supports
- Family involvement and education

**Care works best when it is person-centered, culturally responsive, and strengths-based.**

# REDUCING STIGMA

Stigma remains one of the **biggest** barriers to care.

People with co-occurring disorders are often told they must:

- **“Get sober first”** before addressing mental health, or
- **“Fix mental health first”** before entering substance use treatment

**This message is harmful and incorrect.**

**People deserve care for their full experience—without judgment, blame, or delay.**

# HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Share accurate information about co-occurring disorders
- Encourage integrated treatment options
- Use person-first language (e.g., “a person with a substance use disorder”)
- Listen without judgment
- Promote hope and recovery

**Every compassionate conversation helps reduce stigma and increase access to care.**

# HELP IS AVAILABLE

## IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW NEEDS SUPPORT

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline  
Call or text 988 (U.S.)

SAMHSA National Helpline  
1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Visit [helplineL.org](https://www.helplineL.org)  
Call 833-657-7147



**RECOVERY IS REAL.  
SUPPORT WORKS.**

Treating mental health and substance  
use together saves lives.



**SAMHSA**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration

**PREVENTION FIRST**   
Substance Use Treatment Training  
& Technical Assistance Center (SATAC)