

Having dual diagnosis / co-occurring disorder

What is dual diagnosis?

Also called '**co-occurring disorders**' and '**comorbidity**'

It is when someone has a mental disorder AND an alcohol or drug problem (for example, depression and they drink too much, or schizophrenia and a heroin addiction).

- ✧ This is **common** – many people who have one problem also have the other.
- ✧ Dual diagnosis affects people differently depending on
 - How serious each problem is
 - Which drugs and mental health issues are involved
- ✧ The two disorders can also affect each other, meaning that one problem can influence the other.

What causes dual diagnosis? Why do substance use and mental health problems occur together?

The relationship between substance use and mental health problems is complex and varies from person to person. Here are some reasons why someone might experience both problems together:

- ✧ Because people with mental health difficulties may 'self medicate' with different drugs to cope or feel better, **and/or**
- ✧ Regular drug use issues can create situations that lead to depression, anxiety, trauma and other problems **and/or**
- ✧ Substance use and mental health problems may be caused by the same things, such as stressful/traumatic life events or environment.

It can often be unclear to family members where it all started, especially when one problem usually affects the other.

Why do people with mental health issues use drugs or alcohol?

Like anyone else, people with mental health issues who use drugs do it because it helps them feel better, or tune out (or both). They may also use drugs to help them ignore or temporarily manage the symptoms of mental illness (i.e. alcohol may make people feel less anxious), **BUT** long term use and withdrawal from the drug makes symptoms worse.

Why can't they just stop using?

One of the difficulties about becoming addicted to a drug or to alcohol is that it can be very hard to stop using. Reasons for this include:

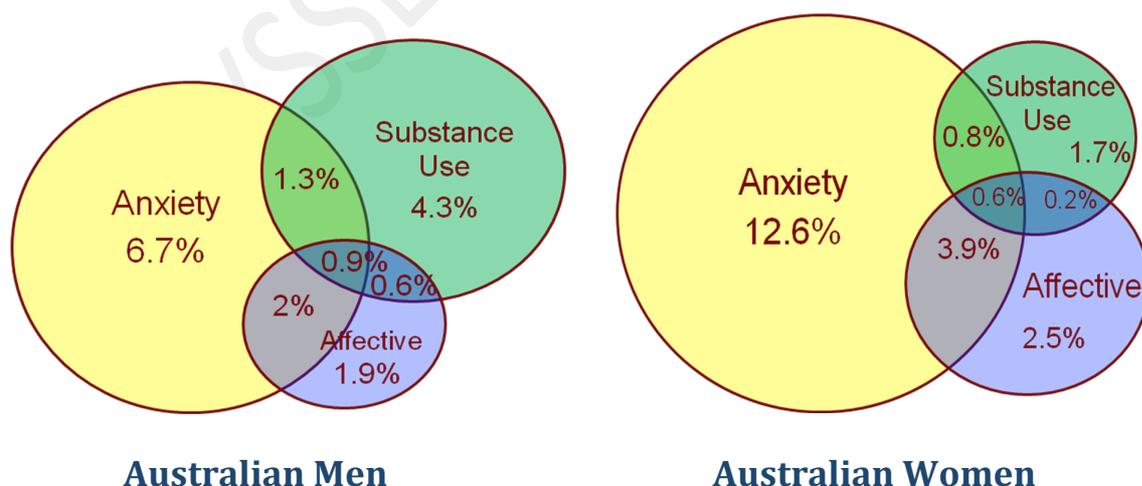
- ☞ Their body has become used to the drug
 - They need the drug (or alcohol) just to feel 'normal'.
 - If they don't 'top up' regularly, they go into withdrawal. Symptoms of withdrawal vary according to the drug and can get very serious. They range from restlessness, trouble sleeping, headaches and being irritable to nausea, shakes, sweating, seizures, confusion, hallucinations, blackouts and depression.
- ☞ Their experience of pleasure has often changed so that the usual things don't make them feel good.
- ☞ Drug or alcohol use often causes problems with money, relationships, accommodation, health etc. It can be tough to face up to all of these problems without some sort of escape. People who have been using one drug will sometimes swap to a different drug (or to alcohol) to cope, which continues the problems.
- ☞ If someone has anxiety, depression or trauma, the drugs can be a way of coping. Take the drugs away and they have no other way of managing how they feel.

How common is dual diagnosis?

- 1 in 5 Australian adults had anxiety, mood or substance use disorder in the past year *(NSMHWB, 2007)*
- Mental illness among people in Alcohol and Drug treatment varies from 51-84% *(Brems and Johnson, 1997)*
- Depression, anxiety and personality disorders are the most common

Prevalence of Mood (Anxiety & Affective) and Substance Use Disorders

(NSMHWB, 2007; graphs sourced from Australian Government Dept Health & Aging)



Treatment

- People who have co-occurring disorders can get treatment
 - for each disorder separately (one after the other)
 - or can be treated for both disorders at the same time (integrated treatment).
- Treatment of both at the same time is often provided by different services who work together, or by one service which has the skills to manage both.
- In Australia, mental health and drug and alcohol services are putting a lot of time into improving their skills to work together and to offer integrated treatment.
(see the “Dealing with the Treatment System” flier for more information)

Recovery and relapse prevention

- ☆ Recovery can take time. Some people get steadily better. Others can do well for a while and then have a lapse or a relapse.
- ☆ For people with a dual diagnosis, access to good treatment and taking extra care with health are two important parts of recovery. Also important is staying connected and being able to communicate with the people you care about.
- ☆ Apart from getting good treatment, if people are helped to stay safe, they are more likely to improve.

☆ A good support network of friends and family can be the anchor for helping people recover

- ☆ One of the most important things for family and friends to think about is **how to keep communication open and maintain a relationship** when the person they love is making poor choices, choices they don't agree with, or when they are feeling things are very difficult.
- ☆ Remember, if someone does start using again, this is common. Do not lose hope - many people relapse, often several times, before they get out of their substance abuse cycle but they are often learning something new each time. Even in the toughest situations, as long as someone keeps breathing, there's always the chance things will come good.

How having a dual diagnosis can affect the person and their family, friends, partners

- It can change the way people behave with each other.
- It may also affect behaviour, income, responsibilities and choices. When someone is unwell or using, other parts of their life can be put on hold.

- This can create stress for the family and for everyone involved, including the person with the dual diagnosis.
- On the good side, many people also say that it can help family and friends to notice what is most important in their lives and create a different way of thinking about themselves and the people they love.

More information....

Odyssey House Victoria has created some factsheets for people who have co-occurring disorders and for their families to read online or download – These factsheets were created to provide practical information for people with a co-occurring disorders and their families.

There are many websites that can also give you helpful information. These change over time, so we recommend

- ☞ You contact us (03) 9420 7600 to speak to a counsellor for further information or
- ☞ Search the internet using search terms such as 'dual diagnosis' 'co-occurring disorders', or 'comorbidity' and 'resources' and 'family' or 'client'. Often one resource will lead to another.
- ☞ The websites we have on the Odyssey 'mental health' page will also lead you to other resources.