

Treatment programs for co-occurring disorders/ dual diagnosis

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers an extensive listing of licensed, certified drug treatment facilities. Similar treatment facilities are also available in other parts of the world. See References and Resources below for links.

Treatment programs for veterans with co-occurring disorders

Veterans deal with additional challenges when it comes to co-occurring disorders. The pressures of deployment or combat can exacerbate underlying mental disorders, and substance abuse is a common way of coping with unpleasant feelings or memories. Often, these problems take a while to show up after a vet returns home, and may be initially mistaken for readjustment. Untreated co-occurring disorders can lead to major problems at home and work and in your daily life, so it's important to seek help.

Veterans often benefit from treatment and support from specialized programs that address the unique stresses veterans face. To learn more, see References and Resources below.

Dual diagnosis with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

The mental health problem that often co-occurs with substance abuse in veterans is PTSD, the most severe form of emotional and psychological trauma. Its primary symptoms include intrusive memories or flashbacks, avoiding things that remind you of the traumatic event, and living in a constant state of “red alert.”

Group support for co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorders

As with other addictions, groups are very helpful, not only in maintaining sobriety, but also as a safe place to get support and discuss challenges. Sometimes treatment programs for co-occurring disorders provide groups that continue to meet on an aftercare basis. Your doctor or treatment provider may also be able to refer you to a group for people with co-occurring disorders.

While it's often best to join a group that addresses both substance abuse and your mental health disorder, twelve-step groups for substance abuse can also be helpful—plus they're more common, so you're likely to find one in your area. These free programs, facilitated by peers, use group support and a set of guided principles—the *twelve steps*—to obtain and maintain sobriety.

Just make sure your group is accepting of the idea of co-occurring disorders and psychiatric medication. Some people in these groups, although well meaning, may mistake taking psychiatric medication as another form of addiction. You want a place to feel safe, not pressured.

Self-help for co-occurring alcohol or drug addiction and mental health problems

Getting sober is only the beginning. Your continued recovery depends on continuing mental health treatment, learning healthier coping strategies, and making better decisions when dealing with life's

challenges.

Recovery tip 1: Recognize and manage overwhelming stress and emotions

Learn to recognize hidden stress

- **Learn how to manage stress.** Stress is inevitable, so it's important to have healthy coping skills so you can deal with stress without turning to alcohol or drugs. Stress management skills go a long way towards preventing relapse and keeping your symptoms at bay.
- **Know your triggers and have an action plan.** If you're coping with a mental disorder as well, it's especially important to know signs that your illness is flaring up. Common causes include stressful events, big life changes, or unhealthy sleeping or eating. At these times, having a plan in place is essential to preventing drug relapse. Who will you talk to? What do you need to do?

Recovery tip 2: Stay connected

- **Get therapy or stay involved in a support group.** Your chances of staying sober improve if you are participating in a social support group like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous or if you are getting therapy.
- **Follow doctor's orders.** Once you are sober and you feel better, you might think you no longer need medication or treatment. But arbitrarily stopping medication or treatment is a common reason for relapse in people with co-occurring disorders. Always talk with your doctor before making any changes to your medication or treatment routine.

Recovery tip 3: Make healthy lifestyle changes

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- **Practice relaxation techniques.** When practiced regularly, relaxation techniques such as mindfulness meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and deep breathing can reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, and increase feelings of relaxation and emotional well-being.
- **Adopt healthy eating habits.** Start the day right with breakfast, and continue with frequent small meals throughout the day. Going too long without eating leads to low blood sugar, which can make you feel more stressed or anxious.
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercise is a natural way to bust stress, relieve anxiety, and improve your mood and outlook. To achieve the maximum benefit, aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on most days.
- **Get enough sleep.** A lack of sleep can exacerbate stress, anxiety, and depression, so try to get 7 to 9 hours of quality sleep a night.

Helping a loved one with co-occurring disorders

Helping a loved one with both a substance abuse and a mental health problem can be a roller coaster. Resistance to treatment is common and the road to recovery can be long.

The best way to help someone is to accept what you can and cannot do. You cannot force someone to remain sober, nor can you make someone take their medication or keep appointments. What you can do

is make positive choices for yourself, encourage your loved one to get help, and offer your support while making sure you don't lose yourself in the process.

- **Seek support.** Dealing with a loved one's dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse can be painful and isolating. Make sure you're getting the emotional support you need to cope. Talk to someone you trust about what you're going through. It can also help to get your own therapy or join a support group.
- **Set boundaries.** Be realistic about the amount of care you're able to provide without feeling overwhelmed and resentful. Set limits on disruptive behaviors, and stick to them. Letting the co-occurring disorders take over your life isn't healthy for you or your loved one.
- **Educate yourself.** Learn all you can about your loved one's mental health problem, as well as substance abuse treatment and recovery. The more you understand what your loved one is going through, the better able you'll be to support recovery.
- **Be patient.** Recovering from a dual diagnosis doesn't happen overnight. Recovery is an ongoing process that can take months or years, and relapse is common. Ongoing support for both you and your loved one is crucial as you work toward recovery.