

Twelve Step meetings offer support for chemical dependency issues as well as mental health issues. When choosing a meeting, it is important to find a group that is tolerant of taking medication to manage psychiatric illnesses. Selecting a sponsor knowledgeable in the area of co-occurring disorders is essential. There are also some recovery groups available specifically for individuals with co-occurring disorders.

### References

- Alcoholics Anonymous. "The Forgotten Chapter: Alcoholism and Mental Illness." *Grapevine* (March 1995): 5–13.
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- Raimo, E. B., and M. A. Schuckert. "Alcohol Dependence and Mood Disorders." *Addictive Behaviors* 23 (1998): 933–46.

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# Adults and Co-occurring Disorders

## FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

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### Note:

Before showing the video, take a few minutes to review this guide, which provides some general information about co-occurring disorders. Feel free to copy and distribute the reproducible worksheet to clients to help them better process the video content.

### Objectives

- After viewing this video, clients should be able to
- identify symptoms of chemical use that mimic symptoms of psychiatric illness
  - see the importance of integrated treatment
  - understand why psychiatric medication needs to be taken exactly as prescribed

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## Introduction

It is often difficult—but crucial—to assess mental health issues when someone enters substance dependency treatment. Research suggests that as many as 80 percent of alcoholics entering treatment experience depressive symptoms; however, only 30 percent actually meet diagnostic criteria for depression. Symptoms of chemical use can mimic symptoms of psychiatric illnesses because

- many drugs themselves are depressants
- alcohol and other drugs may provide a chemical cushion to buffer the emotional impact of everyday events
- the normal course of addiction may have brought about many difficulties, such as divorce or medical issues, that cause intense grief and increased anxiety

## What Is a Co-occurring Disorder?

A co-occurring disorder is any combination of psychiatric illnesses and substance use disorders. People with both a psychiatric diagnosis and a substance use diagnosis are referred to as having a dual diagnosis, or a co-occurring disorder. At least ten million people in the United States have a co-occurring disorder. As a result, they have severe and chronic medical, social, and emotional problems and are more vulnerable to both alcohol and other drug relapses. The most commonly seen psychiatric diagnoses include mood disorders such as major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and dysthymic disorder. The most commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Treatment needs to be integrated to address both the substance use disorder as well as the psychiatric illness.

The symptoms of one disorder can mask the symptoms of the other. Untreated chemical dependency may contribute to a relapse of the psychiatric illness, while an untreated psychiatric illness may contribute to an alcohol or drug relapse. Recovery is the process of accepting and managing the co-occurring disorder and making personal changes to reduce the risk of relapse and improve one's sense of self.

## How Is a Co-occurring Disorder Treated?

Successful recovery depends on a thorough assessment of mental health issues, individual psychotherapy, treatment compliance, and medication, if necessary. It is also beneficial to seek out a therapist skilled in the treatment of both mental health issues and addiction. Before an individual with a co-occurring disorder takes any medication, he or she should consult with a mental health professional skilled in the treatment of addiction. Most medications are nonaddictive, but some medications are highly addictive, such as benzodiazepines.

When a chemically dependent individual needs to take psychiatric medications, significant issues may arise. That individual may

- be impatient or want a “quick fix”
- fail to take medication as prescribed
- skip doses
- stop taking medication prematurely
- fail to get prescriptions renewed
- mix medication with alcohol or other drugs
- take a break from medication in order to use alcohol or other drugs
- not be able to afford the high cost of certain medications

## **Adults and Co-occurring Disorders Worksheet**

What is the definition of a co-occurring disorder?

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What is the purpose of integrated treatment, in which both the substance use disorder and the psychiatric illness are addressed?

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List several reasons why people go off their medications without consulting their physician.

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Identify ways in which an untreated psychiatric issue could cause relapse.

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How important is spirituality in a recovery program?

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