

Facts about addiction and ADHD

People with alcohol and other drug dependencies often suffer from co-occurring mental health illnesses.

Mental health and recovery

Individuals with untreated mental health issues may experience more difficulty in recovery. Impatience, impulsivity and poor judgment are often problems among alcoholics and addicts. Sometimes these problems improve in recovery.

Other individuals struggle with these problems throughout their lives. The use of alcohol or drugs or the withdrawal from alcohol or drugs can cause symptoms that mimic attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In these cases, symptoms may be substance induced and they will disappear with prolonged abstinence.

What is ADHD?

ADHD involves a pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity that interferes with daily activities.¹ Individuals with ADHD experience impatience, impulsive behaviors, and have difficulty paying attention. For these individuals the symptoms of ADHD continue, and may even worsen, with prolonged abstinence, making recovery more difficult. For these individuals, treatment options are available.

Is there a link between ADHD and addiction?

The relationship between ADHD and addiction appears to be especially complex. Some studies show a higher rate of ADHD among substance abusers and that people with ADHD may develop substance use problems at an earlier age.² In addition to addiction, people with ADHD often experience a variety of other problems, especially anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and obsessive-compulsive behaviors.³

Symptoms of ADHD

- Careless mistakes in school or work
- Difficulty paying attention to tasks or activities
- Not listening when spoken to
- Being easily distracted
- Forgetful in daily activities
- Short attention span
- Difficulty structuring time or organizing
- Avoidance or reluctance to engage in activities that require sustained mental work
- Fidgeting or squirming
- Difficulty engaging with others
- Feelings of restlessness
- Talking excessively
- Interrupting or intruding

Diagnosis of ADHD

Careful diagnosis is critical. If you experience these symptoms of ADHD, it is important that you have an assessment by a mental health professional that has expertise in alcohol and drug dependency.

Treatments available

Typically ADHD in alcoholics and addicts is treated with therapy and medications. Therapy that includes behavioral interventions is effective in treating and managing symptoms of ADHD.⁴

Some medications used to treat ADHD can be addictive and harmful to recovering alcoholics and addicts. There are, however, several safe, effective, and non-addictive medications available to treat ADHD.

It is important to discuss medications and other treatment options with a mental health professional who has expertise in alcohol and drug dependency. The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and a sponsor can also be helpful in learning to live with ADHD.

About Mental Health Services

Mental health services at Hazelden are part of the internationally recognized Hazelden Foundation. Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden's comprehensive approach to addiction addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

For more information about mental health services at Hazelden, please call 800-257-7800.

References

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