

Dual Diagnosis: Adolescents with Co-occurring Brain Disorders & Substance Abuse Disorders



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Having two disorders (a mental illness and a substance use disorder) is called dual diagnosis. Dual diagnosis is very common.

What causes these disorders?

Different kinds of mental illnesses are caused by different things. Sometimes a teenager feels bad and uses drugs or alcohol to try and feel better. This can lead to addiction or dependency on that substance. Sometimes, a teenager starts experimenting with drugs or alcohol and this causes brain changes to develop into a mental illness. Often, we are not sure which one came first.

Why is it so hard to get help for dual diagnosis?

There are many programs to help with substance use. There are also many programs to help with mental illnesses. There are not a lot of programs that treat both at the same time. People with dual diagnosis need to treat mental illness and substance use together.

What does not help people with dual diagnosis?

- Saying things like “Just say no”.
- Shaming or trying to “scare them straight”
- Treatment programs that are just for substance use.
- Treatment programs that are just for mental illnesses.

What is a better approach? What does help people with dual diagnosis?

- Therapy
- Medication
- Programs that treat mental illnesses and substance use disorders at the same time
- Support groups

If your teen has dual diagnosis

- Encourage them to go to support groups
- Do not nag, preach or lecture
- Set rules and follow through
- Help them join after school activities, part time jobs or volunteering opportunities
- Do not expect them to get better right away
- Give love, support and understanding
- Get support for yourself; go to support groups, talk with friends, or take time for yourself
- Remember that recovery is possible

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