Diagnosing and Treating Co-occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders

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Sarah Lewis-Fernandez, LMSW, CASAC, CAC, CT with Sharon Smith- Parent Advisory Board Member
Basic Points

- Every person is to be evaluated individually and understand it will be a process to assess and treat co-occurring disorders.
- Diverse population - very mild to severe on both sides - and can be temporary or permanent.
- Disagreement in the field about diagnosis, treatment and medication.
- To make the situation more complicated, the co-occurring disorders affect each other and interact.
Prevalence

- Various studies have found that 40-70% of people meet requirements for both a mental health disorder and substance use disorder.
- According to reports from JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association):
  - 37% of alcohol abusers and 53% of drug abusers have at least one other serious mental illness.
  - Of all people diagnosed as mentally ill, 29% abuse either alcohol or drugs.
Substance Use Disorder Diagnosis

• Some signs of Substance Use Disorder (SUD):
  • Feeling that you have to use the drug regularly — this can be daily or even several times a day and making sure you have it.
  • Failing in your attempts to stop using the drug.
  • Spending money on the drug, even though you can't afford it.
  • Doing things to obtain the drug that you normally wouldn't do, such as stealing.
  • Driving or doing other risky activities when you're under the influence of the drug.
  • Feeling that you need the drug to deal with your problems.
Substance Use Disorder Diagnosis

Possible indications that your teenager is using drugs include:

- **Problems at school**- Frequently missing classes or missing school, a sudden disinterest in school or school activities, or a drop in grades may be indicators of drug use.

- **Physical health issues**- Lack of energy and motivation may indicate your child is using certain drugs.

- **Neglected appearance**- Teenagers are generally concerned about how they look. A lack of interest in clothing, grooming or looks may be a warning sign of drug use.

- **Changes in behavior**- Teenagers enjoy privacy, but exaggerated efforts to bar family members from entering their rooms or knowing where they go with their friends might indicate drug use. Drastic changes in behavior and in relationships with family and friends may be linked to drug use.

- **Spending money**- Sudden requests for money without a reasonable explanation for its use may be a sign of drug use. You may also discover money stolen from previously safe places at home. Items may disappear from your home because they're being sold to support a drug habit.
Mental Health Disorder Diagnosis

- Mental Health Disorders (MH)
  - Axis I - Mood, anxiety and psychotic disorders are the most common. Eating disorders are also seen frequently. In adolescents the most common are the disruptive behavior disorders.
  - Axis II - The most frequent in this category are Cluster B; antisocial, borderline, histrionic, and narcissistic.
Co-Occurring Diagnosis

• Importance of substance detoxification and extended assessment period.

• Problems with diagnosis include:
  • Signs of mental disorder can look like addiction and vice versa
  • SUD can mask mental illness
  • Alcohol or drugs can be used to self medicate
  • Denial

• A full assessment at either a MH or SUD provider must include an evaluation for both issues.
  • If have MH diagnosis makes one more vulnerable to SUD problem
Co-Occurring Treatment

- Different options based on severity.
- Importance of collaboration between professionals.
- Medication management can interfere/complicate/assist treatment (addictive qualities of most anxiety relieving medications is a good example).
- A program can be modified if one of the issues is considered mild (i.e. offer medication in a SUD program or special groups in MH program) If severe in both disorders than major modifications necessary for effective TX.
- Long term treatment has the best results- study after study proves this even though short term is more available and residential treatment is becoming less and less accessible.
- Family involvement improves positive outcome.
- Adolescents need adolescent treatment.
- Recovery is ongoing.
Suggested Resources

- Drugfree.org- Helpline for Parents
  1-855-DRUGFREE
  (1-855-378-4373)
- Samsha.gov has treatment locator- SUD and MH providers listed separately- call to make sure if equipped for co-occurring client
- Dynamic Youth Community- call 718-376-7923 or contact www.dyninc.org for help or referral
- NYS Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services website http://www.oasas.ny.gov/
- Reading material- Treating Co-Occurring Disorders by Hendrickson, Schmal and Ekleberry