



THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DRINKING & YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Virtually all college students experience the effects of drinking in some capacity. Four out of five college students drink alcohol and about 72% drink heavily. There are numerous factors that determine whether a person progresses from heavy drinking to alcoholism. Genetics account for 50% of the risk of developing alcoholism, making family history the strongest determinant of who may become an alcoholic. The age that one begins drinking, environment, peers and mental illness also are also important determining factors.

COMORBID ALCOHOL ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

An individual who struggles with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD or an eating disorder may attempt to self-medicate with alcohol. When two disorders occur simultaneously in the same person, they are called comorbid.

Six out of ten people with a substance use disorder also suffer from another form of mental illness. In fact, the National Comorbidity Survey found that alcoholics were two to three times more likely than non-alcoholics to also have an anxiety disorder. Another study found that those with a history of alcohol dependence were at increased risk for a

major depressive episode than those without a history of alcohol dependence.

But, the high prevalence of these comorbidities does not mean that one condition caused the other, even if one appeared first. It isn't always clear which came first; alcohol abuse or a mental health disorder. There are at least three scenarios that we should consider:

- Alcohol abuse can cause a mental illness
- Mental illness can lead to alcohol abuse
- Alcohol abuse and mental health disorders are both caused by other common risk factors

In reality, all three scenarios can contribute, in varying degrees, to the establishment of specific comorbid mental disorders and alcohol abuse.

SO WHAT CAUSES THIS COMORBIDITY?

Evidence suggests that genetic factors may predispose individuals to both mental health and alcohol use disorders. These same factors increase the risk of developing the second disorder once the first appears. A particularly active area of comorbidity research involves the search for genes that might predispose individuals to develop both addictions and other mental illnesses, or have a greater risk of a second disorder occurring after the first appears.

Since an estimated 50% percent of an individual's vulnerability to alcohol abuse is attributable to genetics, most of this vulnerability arises from complex interactions among multiple genes and from genetic interactions with environmental influences.

Alcohol abuse and mental illness often begin in adolescence or childhood when the brain is undergoing dramatic developmental changes. Early exposure to alcohol can change the brain in ways that increase the risk for a mental health disorder, just as early symptoms of a mental health disorder may increase vulnerability to alcohol abuse. There is an overlap of areas in the brain involved in both disorders and research suggests that brain changes from one disorder may affect the other.

In addition, there are overlapping environmental triggers between mental health and alcohol use disorders. Stress and trauma can trigger underlying issues that make an individual more prone to developing a comorbid disorder. Genetics, environment and stress or trauma, can all lead to the perfect storm. When some or all of these factors occur, the onset of a mental health disorder, alcohol use disorder or comorbid disorder is that much more likely.

WHAT DO I DO?

Seeking help early is imperative. The high rate of comorbidity between these disorders requires a comprehensive approach that identifies and evaluates both disorders. Careful diagnosis and monitoring will help ensure that symptoms related to alcohol abuse are not mistaken for a mental health disorder. Individuals who have both an alcohol use disorder and mental health disorder often exhibit symptoms that are more persistent, severe, and resistant to treatment compared with individuals who

have either disorder alone. Therefore, treatment needs to be concurrent, meaning both disorders need to be treated at the same time. Treatment should come from providers who are knowledgeable and trained on the treatment of comorbid disorders.

If you or someone you know is struggling with an alcohol and/or mental health disorder, know that help is available. Call or stop by the counseling center on campus.

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