

Drugs, alcohol and mental illness

What are signs that you might have a drug problem?

As well as the health impact, using any type of recreational drug – be it nicotine, alcohol or a street drug – will be a problem if it changes the way you act (less motivated, irritable, anxious, aggressive), the way you live your life (not getting on with people, not having enough money, finding it hard to keep living in the same house, getting in trouble with the law) or even the way you look (losing or gaining weight, for example).

Do drug problems cause mental illness or does mental illness cause drug problems?

It can be hard to tell which problem came first – the drugs or the mental illness. Having a mental illness can make a person more likely to abuse drugs, to make their symptoms feel better in the short-term. Other people have drug problems that may trigger the first symptoms of mental illness. Some drugs cause a condition called drug-induced psychosis which usually passes after a few days. However, if someone has a predisposition to a psychotic illness such as schizophrenia, these drugs may trigger the first episode in what can be a lifelong mental illness. Using drugs can also make the symptoms of mental illnesses worse and make treatment less effective. Anyone who has, or is vulnerable to, mental illness is therefore strongly discouraged from using drugs.

How common are drug problems among people who have mental illnesses?

People with a mental illness experience drug problems at far higher rates than the general community. Studies suggest that around 50% also have a drug or alcohol problem. It is important, then, that both conditions are correctly diagnosed and receive the appropriate treatment.

What kind of help can I get?

There are a number of ways that you can go about getting help for your drug problem. These include:

Withdrawal programs

These programs involve detoxifying the person of the drug and can be run at a residential centre or in the community.

Self help

Sharing experiences and providing support for each other can be a good way of finding ways of dealing with drug use.

The main type of self-help treatments are mental illness support groups run through community support agencies and Narcotics or Alcoholics Anonymous.

Controlled use

This type of treatment can help you use drugs in a safer way. This is usually offered by a community support agency who can provide information, accommodation, help with finding suitable work and housing as well as training and education.

Counselling

Counselling can help rechannel damaging thoughts about taking drugs and develop different ways of coping with these thoughts.

Medication

Certain medications can help ease the cravings that can make it hard to stop using some drugs.

How do I find out more?

It is important to ask your doctor about any concerns you have. SANE Australia also produces a range of easy-to-read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness.

For more information about this topic see:

① [SANE Guide to Drugs](#)

Explains the relationship between drugs and mental illness and looks at identifying when drug use becomes a problem as well as providing information on how to support someone change their drug use.

① [SANE Guide to Healthy Living](#)

Explains the benefits of being physically healthy, gives tips on how to start becoming healthier and overcome obstacles as well as giving suggestions on finding support to help stay healthy.

① [SANE Guide to a SmokeFree Life](#)

A guide to quitting cigarettes, written specially for people with a mental illness.

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