

The Intersection between Mental Illness and Opioid-Related Substance Use Disorder

Amundsen Davis Health Care Alert
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According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1 in 5 American adults, or approximately 46.6 million people, live with a mental health condition in any given year. Since 1949, May has been Mental Health Awareness Month, a time when various organizations, services, and providers seek to raise awareness and offer support for the millions of Americans living with mental illness, one of the most common of which is depression. Another important objective of Mental Health Awareness Month is lessening the stigma surrounding mental illnesses, for when the misconceptions about mental illnesses are reduced, people are more likely to seek treatment and to receive support from family, friends, and communities.

As society becomes more educated about mental illnesses, including depression, many people are also becoming more aware of the opioid crisis affecting the country as a whole. In 2016, an estimated 11.8 million Americans age 12 years and older, or 4.4 percent of the population, were nonmedical users of opioids – defined as prescription pain relievers and heroin. Opioids are routinely prescribed to treat pain from surgery, injuries, or chronic conditions. While opioids may offer pain relief, anyone can become addicted to prescription opioids, and such addiction can lead to improper abuse of prescription medications and use of illicit drugs. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 130 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose.

What many do not realize is that people suffering from substance use disorder are often also facing mental illness, particularly depression. Research indicates that the link between opioid use disorder and depression is bi-directional: individuals with mental illness are prescribed opioids at a higher rate than the average population. Opioid use, as well as chronic pain treated by opioids, is associated with higher rates of depression. Neither substance use disorder due to opioids nor depression is exclusive to a particular demographic. Instead, these conditions affect people of all ages, genders, and socioeconomic status, including, for example, students, athletes, professionals, and retirees. The opioid crisis is a state and federal priority, with legislation, partnerships, and programs seeking to address and counteract the epidemic and to provide prevention-

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related education and resources. Acknowledging and proactively addressing the relationship between mental illness and substance use disorder is part of a comprehensive approach to reversing the tide of opioid dependence, including by promoting prevention, screening, early intervention, and treatment.

Raising awareness of the relationship between substance use disorder and mental illnesses will increase the likelihood of prevention and treatment. Increased awareness also means increased compassion and engagement, and various groups can help in different ways. For example, health care providers can utilize a holistic approach to screening for and treating substance use disorder and depression, including educating patients about the relationship between the conditions. Employers can educate their staff on the signs of substance use disorder and mental illnesses, particularly depression, and can publicize available resources. Friends and family members, often the first to notice outward signs of substance use disorder and depression, can provide help, encouragement, and support to loved ones in need of treatment. Increased awareness and compassion, along with higher rates of treatment, can lead to a happier, healthier society.

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