

Trauma & Substance Abuse

The relation between substance use and trauma

Research demonstrates a strong link between exposure to traumatic events and substance use problems.

Many people who have experienced child abuse, criminal attack, disasters, war, or other traumatic events turn to substance use to help them deal with emotional pain, bad memories, poor sleep, guilt, shame, anxiety, or terror.



The relation between substance use and trauma



People with substance use problems are more likely to experience traumatic events than those without these problems.

Many people find themselves in a vicious cycle in which exposure to traumatic events produces increased substance use, which produces new traumatic event experiences, which leads to even worse substance use, and so forth

Effects of Substance Use on Trauma Symptoms

- The use of alcohol or drugs can provide a temporary distraction and relief for traumatized people who may be suffering from very serious and even debilitating problems across multiple areas of their lives (thoughts, feelings, bodily experiences, relationship to self and others, and behaviors).
- However, this relief is only temporary, and the use of substances to reduce symptoms ultimately can be harmful.

Effects of Substance Use on Trauma Symptoms

- Substance abuse reduces a person's ability to concentrate, to be productive in work and life in general, to sleep restfully, and to cope with traumatic memories and external stressors.
- Substance abuse can increase emotional numbing, social isolation, anger and irritability, depression, and the feeling of needing to be on guard (hypervigilance).



Effects of Substance Use on Trauma Symptoms

- Binge drinking or using drugs by a traumatized person may be a well-intentioned (but ultimately self-destructive) attempt to “self-medicate” against memories or reminders of horrific traumatic experiences. It may also help with sleep problems such as trouble falling or staying asleep, traumatic nightmares, and constantly being “wound up.”
- Using substances as a way to self-medicate may help with one problem but worsen another.
 - For example, substance abuse may temporarily decrease the severity and the number of frightening nightmares but may also increase irritability and hypervigilance.

What can you do?

- When substance abuse is or has been a problem in addition to traumatization, it is best to seek treatment from an experienced and skilled practitioner who has special expertise in both substance abuse treatment and the treatment of traumatic stress.
- The initial consultation with a mental health professional could include questions that sensitively and thoroughly identify patterns of past and current substance use (alcohol, illicit drugs, or prescribed medication).
- Treatment planning includes a discussion between the provider and the client about the possible effects of substance abuse problems on trauma-related problems, including sleep, anger, anxiety, depression, and work or relationship difficulties.
- Treatment can include education, psychotherapy, and support groups that help the client address substance abuse problems in a manner acceptable to the client.

For more information
on Trauma visit the
“Mental Health” tab
under Resources