



**SA Federation for
Mental Health**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health – Alcohol Abuse

When you have a substance abuse problem and a mental health issue such as depression, bipolar disorder, or anxiety at the same time, it is called a dual diagnosis. In a dual diagnosis, both the mental health disorder and the drug or alcohol addiction have their own unique symptoms that may affect a person's ability to function, handle life's difficulties, and relate to others. These co-occurring disorders also affect each other and interact. When a mental health problem goes untreated, the substance abuse problem usually gets worse as well. And when alcohol or drug abuse increases, mental health problems usually increase too.

According to reports published in the Journal of the American Medical Association:

- Roughly 50 percent of individuals with severe mental disorders are affected by substance abuse
- 37 percent of alcohol abusers and 53 percent of drug abusers also have at least one serious mental illness
- Of all people diagnosed as mentally ill, 29 percent abuse either alcohol or drugs

Alcohol abuse is common among people suffering from mental health conditions. People experiencing anxiety, depression, or other mental illnesses often turn to alcohol to find temporary comfort. Alcohol is also sometimes used as a coping mechanism for those enduring a great deal of stress or hardship, such as getting fired from a job or losing a loved one.

Drinking to deal with difficult feelings or symptoms of mental illness is sometimes called 'self-medication.' But it can make existing mental health problems worse.

Studies have shown that people who consume high amounts of alcohol are vulnerable to higher levels of mental ill health and it can be a related factor in some mental illnesses, such as depression.

The psychological effects of alcohol –

Alcohol is a tranquilliser which depresses the central nervous system. The short term physical effects depend on the blood-alcohol level. It ranges from mild mood changes to complete loss of coordination, vision, balance and speech. Larger amounts of alcohol can impair brain functioning and eventually cause unconsciousness. An extreme overdose can be fatal.

Alcohol abuse may lead to changes in sleeping patterns, changes in mood and personality, depression, anxiety, a shortened attention span and problems with coordination. Other possible psychological effects of alcohol use include panic disorder, hallucinations and delusions. Alcohol use can also interfere with prescribed medication. People who take psychotropic medications, such as those being treated for anxiety or depression, should avoid alcohol completely. Drinking can be extremely dangerous, even fatal, when combined with prescription drugs.

Type of substance	Depressant
Short-term effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling relaxed and more sociable• After a time you may need to drink more in order to recreate these pleasant effects• Large amounts can cause uninhibited behaviour or aggression
Long-term effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Short-term memory loss• Difficulty thinking clearly• Poor concentration• Addiction
Dependency and withdrawal symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anxiety• Delirium (which may include confusion, disorientation and hallucinations)

Signs and symptoms of alcohol abuse or addiction –

- You have problems at work or school because of your drinking, such as being late or not going at all
- You drink in dangerous situations, such as before or while driving a car
- After drinking, you can't remember what happened while you were drinking (blackouts)
- You have legal problems because of your drinking, such as being arrested for harming someone or driving while drunk
- You get hurt or you hurt someone else when you are drinking
- You keep drinking even though you have health problems that are caused or made worse by alcohol use
- Your friends or family members are worried about your drinking
- You cannot stop drinking or control how much you drink
- You need to drink more to get the same effect
- You have withdrawal symptoms when you stop drinking. These include feeling sick to your stomach, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety
- You spend a lot of time drinking and recovering
- You have given up other activities so you can drink
- You keep drinking even though it harms your relationships and causes health problems
- You drink in the morning, are often drunk for long periods of time, or drink alone
- You make excuses for your drinking or do things to hide your drinking, such as buying alcohol at different stores
- You worry that you won't get enough alcohol for an evening or weekend
- You have physical signs of alcohol dependence, such as weight loss, a sore or upset stomach, or redness of the nose and cheeks

If you or someone you know suffers from substance abuse or addiction problems, please contact The South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse on 086 14 72622, or seek the help of a licensed medical practitioner.