What do I need to know about substance use to help a loved one who also has SMI?

Many people struggle with both severe mental illness (SMI) and substance use disorder (SUD). One in four people with an SMI diagnosis also have an SUD diagnosis—referred to as a co-occurring substance use disorder. Sometimes these conditions are referred to as “dual diagnoses,” or the combined conditions might be called “comorbid.”

In Treatment Advocacy Center’s 2019 study Dual Diagnosis: Serious Mental Illness and Co-Occurring Substance Use Disorder, results showed that when compared with individuals without mental illness:

- People with SMI are more likely to smoke tobacco.
- People with SMI are more likely to misuse alcohol.
- Cannabis is the most commonly used drug by people with SMI, with almost 40 percent of people with SMI reporting use.

Combined symptoms make effective treatment even more challenging to access, particularly since so few treatment programs are specifically designed to address both. Only about 12 percent of people with combined SMI and SUD receive treatment that addresses the full range of their needs, and racial disparities for this population are significant.

Advocacy is vitally important to demand more and better services that are actually tailored to help people with co-occurring SUD and SMI.
Specialized treatment tailored to co-occurring SMI and SUD can drastically improve a person’s outcomes. Research clearly shows that failure to provide specialized care for both challenges results in more acute hospitalizations, incarcerations, and abandonment of treatment.

**Is there a connection between marijuana usage and SMI?**

Scientific evidence shows an association between heavy marijuana, or cannabis, usage and the likelihood of developing schizophrenia, especially if an individual also has a genetic predisposition. The increasing potency of cannabis may play a role. Evidence also suggests that cannabis usage can worsen symptoms in individuals who experience psychosis. Providers need to know about any substance use, including cannabis, to collaborate with an individual for the best outcomes.

**What works for treatment of an SMI and SUD?**

The most effective treatment for co-occurring SMI and SUD is integrated dual disorder treatment (IDDT). This treatment combines medication with psychological, educational, and social interventions. IDDT incorporates motivational interviewing, peer support, and medication assisted therapy. Individuals are supported through the four stages of engagement, persuasion, active treatment, and relapse prevention. Harm reduction is the foundation of IDDT, and group meetings with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) are encouraged once the person has reached the active treatment stage.

A place to seek combined treatment is a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC). With grant funding from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), CCBHCs are required to provide combined treatment. Search for CCBHC options in your state.

**What are some of the challenges for treating both conditions?**

Substances can cause significant problems for people who are prescribed medications for SMI. Antipsychotics and mood stabilizers don’t work like they should when mixed with alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, amphetamines, opioids, and other synthetic compounds. A person’s treating physicians need to be aware of all substances being used, including supplements and other legal substances, such as tobacco, caffeine, alcohol, and cannabis. Some supplements and substances can have positive benefits, but a provider needs to know the full mix to make informed decisions about medications and dosages.

Substances can prevent stability in numerous other ways. They can affect sleep, generate financial stress, and make it difficult to stay on a medication schedule. Use of illegal substances carries the risk of arrest and incarceration, further disrupting medication management.

Some providers may be reluctant to prescribe antipsychotics for someone using substances. Antipsychotics can provide critical protection for someone with SMI. The longer a person stays in untreated psychosis, the higher their risk is for physical changes to the brain that can impact...
treatment outcomes and social functioning. Reducing harm from untreated psychosis is a priority, and another provider can be sought to prescribe necessary medication.

**What resources can help family members support someone with co-occurring SUD and SMI?**

Helping someone with co-occurring SMI and SUD is challenging. Appropriate programs are extremely limited and may have significant waitlists. Cost can be a major hurdle if insurance doesn’t cover treatment. The most difficult challenge may be that a loved one won’t pursue treatment for one or both of their co-occurring disorders. Appropriate boundaries and self-care are critically important for anyone attempting to support a person with a persistent, disabling, and often treatment resistant disease.

**SAMHSA’s support portal** includes information to help you find health care, cope with your own illness or the illness of a loved one, understand different types of treatment, and figure out a way to pay for needed care. SAMHSA supports a helpline for treatment referrals and information about mental health and substance use conditions: 800-662-4357.

Note that some treatment programs (including some prominent ones, such as specific AA chapters) encourage the discontinuation of all medications in order to be “sober.” For obvious reasons this could prove catastrophic for people with SMI, so it is important to investigate the treatment philosophy of potential programs to ensure that they are compatible with the needs of the person with SMI.

Medication assisted treatment (MAT) is an important component of SUD treatment, especially for opioid use disorder. MAT includes medications such as methadone, naltrexone, and buprenorphine to reduce symptoms of withdrawal and craving.

**Places to seek help**

- **Certified Community Behavioral Health Centers (CCBHC)** *(thenationalcouncil.org)*: Options are listed by state.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) treatment locator** *(findtreatment.gov)*: Locate treatment by address or facility name.
- **Free Rehab Centers** *(freerehabcenters.org)*: Addiction support and recovery options are listed by state.