It is estimated that around 50% of people with severe mental illnesses are affected by substance abuse. Conversely, approximately 37% of those who abuse alcohol and 53% of those who abuse drugs experience at least one serious mental illness.

There is a strong reciprocal relationship between mental health and drug abuse. However, while substance abuse and mental health problems (such as depression and anxiety) are closely linked, one does not necessarily cause the other.

Alcohol and other drugs are commonly used by people to self-medicate the symptoms of anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses. In the long term, however, this use exacerbates the symptoms that were initially relieved by drugs or alcohol, and causes long term side effects (such as liver or heart conditions).

Abuse of alcohol and other drugs can sometimes increase underlying risk factors for mental illness and push an individual past a tipping point, as a result of the complex interplay of the environment, genetics and other factors that cause mental illness.

Abuse of alcohol and other drugs can make the symptoms of a mental illness worse by triggering new symptoms or increasing the severity of existing symptoms. Substances such as alcohol and illicit drugs also have the potential to interact with prescribed medications (such as mood stabilisers and antidepressants), making them less effective.

There are many mental health effects of commonly used drugs, such as anxiety, depression or sleeping problems. The use of methamphetamines can trigger delirium or psychosis. Existing mental health problems can be exacerbated by the use of cannabis and the use of this drug makes a person more likely to develop a mental health problem (in particular psychosis), later in life. The use of cocaine can lead to panic attacks, paranoia, psychosis, depression and anxiety, while ecstasy use can cause hallucinations, paranoia, memory loss, anxiety and depression. Heroin can limit the efficacy of any treatments for mental health problems, as well as making symptoms worse.

Signs of a problem with alcohol or other drugs
Many people use recreational drugs (alcohol, nicotine, street drugs) without “abusing” them. The use of these drugs will be a concern if it changes the way an individual lives their lives (no longer socialising, not having any money); changes the way they behave (more anxious and irritible, less motivated); or changes the way they look (losing weight, not bathing).

Because of the behavioural changes experienced by people when they develop a mental illness, friends and families can sometimes miss the signs that their loved one also has an alcohol or other drug use problem. Key behaviours associated with alcohol or other drug abuse include:

- Dilated or pinpointed pupils
- New friends appearing
- Sudden financial problems
- Valuables disappearing from the house
- Evidence of needle marks
- Long periods of time spent in the bathroom
- Drug paraphernalia in the house

Treatment
Where addiction and mental illness co-exist, an integrated approach, where both issues are treated at the same time is essential for recovery.

References
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