

# Recovery in Focus: *Concurrent Disorders*

The term *concurrent disorder* describes a condition in which a person has both a mental illness and a substance use problem. This term is a general one and refers to a wide range of mental illnesses and addictions. People with mental illness have much higher rates of addiction than the general population. Similarly, individuals with an addiction have much higher rates of mental illness than the general population.

## MYTHS & FACTS ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS AND ADDICTION

**MYTH: People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.**

**FACT:** People with a mental illness are no more violent than any other group. Research shows that individuals with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than to be violent themselves.

**MYTH: People who use substances do not receive sufficient punishment.**

**FACT:** People with health problems should receive and benefit from health services and not punishment. There are many possible short and long term consequences of substance use such as: mortality, mental health issues, social isolation and stigma. People with addiction are among the most marginalized in our society and are in need of treatment and support. To incarcerate people for drug use is not an effective prevention or treatment strategy.

**MYTH: People with mental illness are poor and/or less intelligent.**

**FACT:** Like physical illnesses, mental illness can affect anyone regardless of intelligence, income level or social class. Studies show that many people with a mental illness have average or above-average intelligence.

**MYTH: It's not worthwhile to invest in treatment for individuals who have drug dependence – it is a waste of public funds.**

**FACT:** Investing in evidence-based treatment for substance dependence reduces negative health consequences and social effects (eg., crime, economic burden and HIV). For every \$1 spent on treatment \$7 are returned in cost-savings. Treatment is proven to be cost-effective and costs less than imprisonment.

**MYTH: More than anything else, addiction is a character flaw.**

**FACT:** Drug addiction is a brain disease. Every type of drug abuse has its own individual mechanism for changing how the brain functions. But regardless of which drug a person is addicted to, many of the effects it has on the brain are similar: they range from changes in the molecules and cells that make up the brain, to mood changes, to changes in memory processes. These changes have a huge influence on all aspects of a person's behaviour. The drug becomes the single most powerful motivator regardless of the consequences. This comes about because drug use has changed the individual's brain and its functioning in critical ways.

**MYTH: Mental illness is caused by a personal weakness.**

**FACT:** A mental illness is not a character flaw, it is an illness, and it has nothing to do with being weak or lacking will-power. Although people with mental illness can play a big part in their own recovery, they did not choose to become ill, and are not lazy because they cannot just 'snap out of it.'

**MYTH: Drugs "fry" your brain.**

**FACT:** The anti-drug commercial that used a frying egg to show "your brain on drugs" oversimplified the effects of substances on the brain. While drug abuse can be bad for the brain, it is not accurate to say that drug use generally causes permanent and severe brain damage, like frying an egg. This myth gives the impression that individuals in recovery are "damaged goods" and sets the stage for discrimination by employers, health care providers and the legal system and further stigmatizes individuals.



**Mental health** describes a level of well-being where we can recognize our own strengths, and have the ability to cope with life's ups and downs as best we can. It is a balance of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health; and ideal we all strive for.

**Mental illness** is a health condition that affects our thinking, mood or behaviour and is generally associated with distress or difficulty functioning. There are many different types of mental illnesses and symptoms can vary from mild to severe. The most common mental illnesses in Canada are anxiety and depressive disorders.

### FACTS ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

- It is estimated that one in five Canadians will have a mental illness at some point in their lifetime, and approximately 10% of Canadians are living with a mental illness at any given time
- 90% of people who commit suicide have a diagnosable mental illness, and there are over 4000 suicides every year in Canada
- Mental disorders are the group of illnesses that contribute more to the global burden of disease than all cancers combined

**Substance use** has been a feature of human societies for thousands of years. Substance use has been regulated in various ways, and it is only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it has been criminalized. Substance use occurs along a continuum from beneficial, to non-problematic or casual use, through to problematic or harmful use.

**Addiction** is on the far end of the spectrum (as described above). It is a primary chronic disease that affects our brain reward circuitry. It is characterized with a harmful preoccupation with substances, identified with a loss of control, cravings, and continued use despite negative consequences. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission.

Sources: Stigma, Discrimination & Substance Use: Experiences of people who use alcohol and other drugs in Toronto. Toronto Drug Strategy Implementation Panel (2010) Toronto, Ontario. Quick Facts on Mental Illness and Addiction in Canada, Mood Disorders Society of Canada (2009). Available at: <http://www.mooddorderscanada.ca/documents/Media%20Room/Quick%20Facts%203rd%20Edition%20Referenced%20Plain%20Text.pdf>. Myths about Mental Illness, Canadian Mental Health Association. Available at: [http://www.cmha.ca/mental\\_health/myths-about-mental-illness/](http://www.cmha.ca/mental_health/myths-about-mental-illness/). Mental Health and Addiction Statistics, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Available at: [http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about\\_camh/newsroom/for\\_reporters/Pages/addictionmentalhealthstatistics.aspx](http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about_camh/newsroom/for_reporters/Pages/addictionmentalhealthstatistics.aspx)

### EFFECTS OF STIGMA

- Only 50% of Canadians would tell coworkers or friends that they have a family member with a mental illness, vs. 72% who would discuss cancer
- Only 12% of Canadians said they would hire a lawyer who has a mental illness, and only 49% said they would socialize with a friend who has a serious mental illness
- 46% of Canadians think that people use the term mental illness as an excuse for bad behaviour; and 27% are fearful of being around people who suffer from serious mental illness

### TAKE ACTION AGAINST STIGMA

We can battle stigma when we have facts. Learning more about mental health and substance use can make a big impact on how we view the world around us. We can also battle stigma if we begin to have candid conversations about our own experiences with mental illness and substance use. By putting a human face on these issues, we can reduce judgment and discrimination. No matter how people developed mental illness or became addicted to substances, non-judgmental support is critical for recovery since discrimination stops people from seeking help.



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