



Understanding substance use disorders

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

As the leader of an agency that provides treatment for mental illness and substance use disorders, I know there is a good bit of misunderstanding about both types of conditions. Although people are beginning to understand more about mental illness, how common it is and that individuals with mental illness can recover, many continue to believe addiction and other substance use disorders are the result of poor choices or morals.

However, just as mental illness can result from a variety of factors outside the control of the individual, so too do substance use disorders. The truth is, while a person might drink alcohol or try other drugs for a variety of reasons, no one ever intends to become addicted. But decades of research about substance use has provided new insights into why some people develop substance use problems and how they can be treated.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reports that substance use disorders occur when the repeated use of alcohol and/or drugs causes significant functional impairment such as health problems, disability and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school or home.

This definition has two key points. First, repeated and regular use of alcohol or drugs is both a risk factor and a sign of a disorder. Second, substance use is considered a disorder when it interferes with normal functioning – missing work or school, neglecting children or household responsibilities – because a person is under the influence, seeking drugs or simply no longer realizes the importance of daily responsibilities.

Interestingly, although we often we refer to mental illness and substance use disorders as different problems, they share many common features. For example, genetic factors can make an individual more susceptible to both mental illness and substance use. Certain environmental factors such as stress and trauma can also increase the risk for both types of disorders. In addition, substance use disorders and mental illness both often begin in adolescence.

The National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA) reports early exposure to drugs may change the brain in ways that increase the risk for mental disorders. But also, early symptoms of a mental disorder may indicate an increased risk for drug use. Because of this, NIDA increasingly recognizes substance use disorders as a type of mental illness, noting that drug abuse can bring about symptoms of another mental illness, while mental disorders can lead to drug abuse. Nearly 8 million adults in the U.S. have co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders.

But regardless of how these disorders might start, it's important to remember both can be treated. And if an individual has both a mental health and substance use disorders, they can often be treated at the same time through integrated therapies.

Having a substance use disorder is nothing to be ashamed of. There is hope and help available to enter a life of recovery – and a variety of treatment options available that can help people stop using, rebuild important relationships and live independent, productive lives.

Highland Rivers Health is one of several providers across northwest Georgia that offer treatment and recovery services for substance use disorders that include one-to-one counseling, support groups, 12-step programs, intensive outpatient services and in-patient programs. Many providers, including us, take Medicaid, Medicare, private insurance or offer sliding fee scales to make treatment services available to anyone who needs them.

If you or someone you know is suffering from substance use or mental illness, treatment is available to help you recover. Don't wait to get help; the sooner you start, the sooner you can be well again.