

Alcohol and Mental Illness

The Two-Way Link

If you are like most people, drinking alcohol may temporarily change your mood, but will not usually have a significant effect on your overall mental health. For people with mental illness or warning signs of mental illness, however, drinking can have serious consequences. Research has confirmed that there is a two-way link between mental illness and alcohol abuse or dependence.

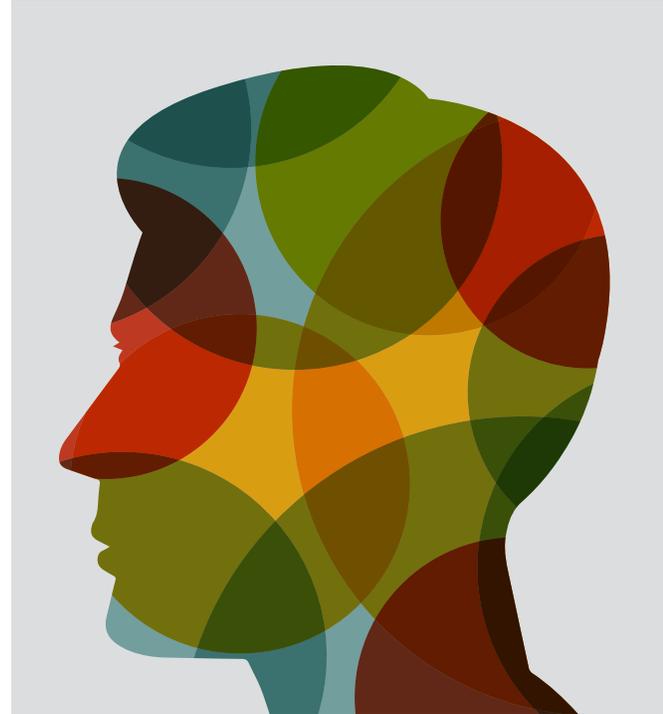
Several theories have been proposed to explain the strong link between mental illness and problem drinking. One states that the genetic and environmental factors that predispose people to mental illness also predispose them to problem drinking. Another is that people who are mentally ill are more sensitive than others to the harmful effects of psychoactive substances. A third theory is that people with mental illness sometimes drink alcohol for its soothing effects, a practice known as self-medication.

Self-medication with alcohol is an understandable attempt to ease suffering experienced as a consequence of mental illness. It can provide immediate gratification, however, that in turn can lead to more drinking.

Alcohol can actually alter the chemistry and physiology of the brain. With long-term use, the brain loses its natural capacity to control stress, mood disorders and anxiety in the absence of alcohol. Although a small amount of alcohol may bring short-term stress relief, alcohol does not treat any of the causes of the stress. Over the long term, people who self-medicate need increasingly larger amounts of alcohol to obtain an acceptable level of dopamine and feel the psychological benefits.

While mental health problems can lead to problem drinking in some people, the opposite may also occur: problem drinking can contribute to the development of mental illness. When people experiencing the warning signs of mental disorders take psychoactive substances such as alcohol, they are at greater risk of developing a mental illness. A genetic predisposition to certain personality disorders may be exacerbated if there is prenatal exposure to alcohol.

Anyone who feels particularly anxious or depressed and is experiencing unusual symptoms, such as difficulty concentrating, reduced focus, sleep disturbances or a need to withdraw socially, should avoid alcohol completely. Alcohol can make people who are genetically predisposed to mental illness even more vulnerable.



Alcohol and Dependence

Physical dependence can develop after a person repeatedly, over time, drinks alcohol to excess. The nervous system adapts to the chronic presence of a depressant. Signs of dependence include tolerance and withdrawal. Psychological dependence is not as well defined. A psychologically dependent person may experience uncomfortable feelings, such as anxiety and even panic when alcohol is not available.

Alcohol and Sleep

Because alcohol disrupts sleep, which is essential to mental health, anyone with a mental illness should avoid drinking or keep drinking to a minimum.

Alcohol and Medications

Many prescription drugs intended to help alleviate the symptoms of a mental illness interact with alcohol. People taking medication for a mental illness should talk to their doctor or pharmacist about these possible interactions.

Alcohol and Suicide

There is a high correlation between alcohol dependence and suicide. There are several possible reasons for this. Many people who drink excessively have a co-existing mood disorder, which increases the risk of suicide. Drinking also increases impulsivity, and the decision to die by suicide is sometimes made on impulse. Drinking excessively or dependently puts a strain on relationships with friends, family and colleagues, and the resulting conflicts and loneliness increase the risk of suicide.

For More Information

Alberta Health Services offers a wide range of addiction and mental health services. For individuals looking for help for themselves or for someone they care about, the addiction and mental health lines are available 24 hours a day.

Addiction Helpline: 1-866-332-2322

Mental Health Helpline: 1-877-303-2642

For more detailed information on this topic and for other related information, go to the [Alcohol and Health Series](#) at albertahealthservices.ca

