

Manitoba Addictions Awareness Week



Substance Use and Mental Health

Adolescence is the time for exploration and opportunity; a time when young people lay the foundations for physical, psychological and social maturity. Studies have shown that the majority of adolescents in Canada are well-adjusted, do well in school, get along with their parents and are generally happy.

Substance use is but one of many “adult” behaviours adopted by youth. As youth generally use substances to express their independence and autonomy, this use should not be automatically equated with “substance abuse.” Most adolescents who use substances do not progress to problem use or dependency.

But for those youth who do develop a substance use problem, it is common to also find a mental health problem.

The combination of problem substance use and a mental health concern is referred to as a co-occurring disorder.

What comes first — the substance use problem or the mental health concern — varies and may be difficult to determine. The two are often intertwined and related.

Although the majority of young people are generally happy and healthy, there is substantial cause for concern.

Consider the following:

- Adolescents with a substance use problem are about three times as likely to have a concurrent mental health concern as youth without a substance use problem.
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a significant risk factor for substance use problems.

Research suggests that many young people with ADHD use substances (e.g., alcohol, cannabis, cocaine) to feel better about themselves and to alter their moods in an effort to cope. An estimated 20 per cent of grade school children have been diagnosed with ADHD.

- Researchers have found a strong association between major depression and problem substance use. One study found that adolescents and young adults who had had a depressive or anxiety problem had double the risk of subsequent problem substance use.
- People who frequently use alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs are more likely to experience mental health problems.

What to Know and Watch For Overlapping Problems

- Substance use and mental health problems commonly occur together. Accordingly, the treatment of both should be integrated.
- Many mental health problems (e.g., anxiety disorders, conduct disorders, depression) tend to precede the onset of problem substance use. Youth often report using substances to cope with other issues. For example, some youth report using cannabis to help decrease the impulsive urges that they experience as a result of ADHD. However, student cannabis use has also been associated with a decreased ability to concentrate and poor academic performance in school.
- Just as some mental illnesses have been seen to increase the incidence of substance use, substance use has been seen to increase the risk of experiencing mental health problems.
- The indicators for substance use and mental health problems are similar and include change in mood, behaviours and relations, declining school performance, quitting hobbies or dropping out of recreational activities.
- At times, problem substance use can mimic mental illness (e.g., people who chronically use marijuana can have similar symptoms to people with clinical depression).

Family Influence

Young people are at greater risk for substance use and mental health problems

when there is serious family conflict, poor or inappropriate family management, physical or sexual abuse, or if one or both parents have a mental health or substance use problem.

Most Common Co-occurring Mental Health Problems

For youth who have substance use problems, the most common co-occurring mental health problems are:

Depression — often precedes problem substance use. Most substances (e.g., alcohol, marijuana) that youth use to cope with depression cause greater depression with chronic use.

Social Anxiety — when a young-person tries alcohol or other drugs, the-anxiety-reducing effect of the substance can promote ongoing use.

Post-traumatic Stress — the incidence of post-traumatic stress is much higher when the young person has been sexually or physically abused. People experiencing post-traumatic stress often use substances to help numb painful emotions and deal with anger.

Conduct Disorders — this condition is highly linked with problem substance use and usually precedes it. It is also commonly associated with ADHD. Youth with conduct disorder are risk-takers and often use a gamut of substances to enjoy the excitement and rush.

Eating Disorders — usually have their onset in adolescence. Young people with an eating disorder tend to use substances that suppress their appetite, such as nicotine, alcohol or stimulants (e.g., diet pills, caffeine pills, speed, cocaine).

What Can You Do?

Early identification and treatment of young children and youth who have mental health problems may help prevent later substance use. The reverse is also true: those who have a substance use problem should be thoroughly assessed to determine if they have co-occurring mental health problems. If mental health problems are related to substance use, both problems need to be addressed concurrently.

If you work with youth, you can play an important role. Here's how:

- Know the general signs or symptoms indicating that a young person may have a

substance use problem and/or a mental health concern.

- Know what support services exist in your community and how to access them.
- Make referrals to programs that address concurrent disorders.
- Know that one caring person in a young person's life can make the difference!

Some Resources and Services

Check your local Regional Health Authority or AFM Office for services in your area.

Addictions Foundation of Manitoba - Youth Programs, Services and Resources

- Winnipeg 204-944-6235
- West Region 1-866-767-3838
- North Region 1-866-291-7774
- **Provincial Library** 1-204-944-6233
- Website: <http://www.afm.mb.ca>

Canadian Mental Health Association - Manitoba Division

- 204-953-2350 or online at <http://www.cmhamanitoba.mb.ca/go.aspx>

Mental Health Education Resource Centre:

- 1-866-997-9918 or online at <http://www.mherc.mb.ca>
- *Getting Help Guides* by Health Region available online at: <http://www.mherc.mb.ca/printables.html>

Manitoba Regional Health Authorities

- <http://www.gov.mb.ca/health/rha/rhamap.html>

Health Links Information Line 1-888-315-9257

Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre

204-958-9660

Mobile Crisis Unit 1-866-332-3030

Klinik 24 Hr. Crisis Line 1-888-322-3019

Teen Touch 1-800-563-8336

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868

Farm & Rural Stress Line 1-866-367-3276

Contact Community Information 1-204-287-8827

- <http://www.contactmb.org>
- Including regional listings for
 - MB Schizophrenia Society
 - Anxiety Disorders Assoc.
 - Mood Disorders Assoc.
 - Canadian Mental Health Assoc.

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