

Are You Using Drugs or Alcohol to Cope with Depression or Anxiety?

•Pursuit of fleeting relief can lead to “dual diagnosis”•What is “self-medication” for depression or anxiety?•Signs of a problem•The importance of getting help•Resources

Mood disorders such as depression or anxiety can cause distressing symptoms, including sleep problems, nervousness, and losing interest in activities that used to be pleasurable. So, it's not surprising that people with these common disorders sometimes use drugs or alcohol to get some relief.

Pursuit of fleeting relief can lead to “dual diagnosis”

Unfortunately, relief gained through self-medication is nearly always short-lived, and drugs or alcohol are likely to make the problems worse. All mood-altering chemicals have a rebound effect, so even if they give relief initially, they usually cause the symptoms to worsen afterward. There is also the risk of developing a substance use disorder in addition to the mental health disorder, known as a *dual diagnosis* or *co-occurring disorder*.

People with a dual diagnosis need to treat both the alcohol or drug dependency and the mood disorder to support recovery. If you suspect that you may be relying too heavily on alcohol or drugs to cope with sadness or anxiety or to help you sleep or stay awake, it's important to seek professional help as soon as possible. Substance dependence can persist even after the emotional issue has been resolved.

What is “self-medication” for depression or anxiety?

Self-medication for depression or anxiety refers to the unmonitored use of substances to relieve symptoms, such as racing thoughts, low energy, sleeplessness, or sadness. Substances commonly used to cope with these conditions include alcohol, stimulants, marijuana, hallucinogens, and prescription drugs such as tranquilizers and painkillers. For example, someone who has been feeling very anxious may use alcohol or marijuana to experience a calming effect. Likewise, someone who is depressed may use cocaine or other stimulants to “make it through” the day or an event.

It is particularly problematic when an individual uses one substance to “get up” and then another to “come back down,” which is a common pattern for those who use substances to deal with the symptoms of a mental health disorder. This can lead to feeling dependent on drugs or alcohol for daily living.

Substance use can ultimately worsen the emotional symptoms it is being used to manage. For example, many people who know they have depression and know that alcohol is a depressant will

continue to use alcohol to manage their depression symptoms. This is particularly true when the cycle of addiction and withdrawal sets in. When the substance is removed, a chemical imbalance occurs, which leads to worsening symptoms from the mental health disorder, and this prompts a return to substance use for relief.

Depression and anxiety are two common mental health issues. People with chronic depression or anxiety are at increased risk for developing an addiction.

Signs of a problem

Here are some of the common signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety:

- irritability
- decreased energy
- feeling down
- insomnia
- poor concentration
- dizziness or lightheadedness
- trembling or sweating
- excessive discomfort in social situations (for example, going to a party or a new place)
- irrational fear of relatively safe settings (for example, movie theatres)
- suicidal thoughts
- isolation

Here are some warning signs of a substance use problem:

- feelings of remorse after using drugs or alcohol
- preoccupation with either drugs or alcohol
- inability to stop or control use of drugs and alcohol (for example, being unable to have just one drink or needing to use cocaine every weekend)
- interference with work responsibilities (for example, frequently arriving late to work because of hangovers)
- blackouts or memory lapses
- continued use of drugs or alcohol despite negative consequences

However, not everyone who self-medicates experiences the symptoms listed above. To examine this further, you might think about your particular pattern of drug or alcohol use and how they relate to symptoms of depression or anxiety. For example, perhaps you have an intense fear of meeting new people and find yourself needing to drink heavily in order to enjoy yourself at a social function. Or maybe you feel sad and have low energy in the evenings unless you use cocaine before coming home from work.

The importance of getting help

It can be difficult to acknowledge that there may be a problem. It is common for people to think, “I am just going through a bad time right now, but it will go away.” However, if you’ve been using

drugs or alcohol to cope, consider if your use has changed or intensified with respect to the warning signs listed above. If you identify with any of the symptoms or behaviours associated with substance misuse or addiction, taking action and getting an assessment can help remove any lingering doubts.

Likewise, depression and anxiety can be clinical disorders, or they can sometimes be situational, prompted by major life events such as job loss or a child going off to college. Whatever your experience is, it's important to remember that treatment is available to support you.

Stopping certain behaviours, even when you recognize that they are not helpful, can be challenging. By seeking help, you are not making an immediate decision to stop using alcohol or drugs completely or immediately; rather, you are giving yourself the opportunity to find out what assistance is available to you. Multiple treatment options are available, including psychotherapy, support groups, and sometimes appropriate medications, to alleviate the underlying problems for which you were using alcohol and/or drugs to cope.

If you have a mental health diagnosis, it is important to be honest with your treatment provider about your use of alcohol and other substances. Some medications used in the treatment of mental health conditions can interact with alcohol or common drugs in dangerous and life-threatening ways. Overcoming substance misuse can open the door to developing healthy, long-term coping strategies.

Just as every person is unique, each person's recovery has different needs depending on the nature and severity of their problems. That's why it is critical to get an evaluation by a doctor or mental health professional before deciding on a course of treatment.

Initial steps to find your appropriate treatment might include the following:

Make an appointment with your primary care physician or family doctor. Your health care provider may be able to evaluate your situation and make referrals for treatment options. In fact, contacting your health care provider to conduct a thorough medical exam is very important to rule out any underlying medical problems. This can be critical because the symptoms of anxiety and depression can sometimes be caused by medical disorders.

Get an evaluation at a substance-use treatment facility. To find out about treatment facilities in your area, you might contact the [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health \(CAMH\)](#) or call its helpline at 416 535 8501. You can also search online for a substance-use treatment centre near you and see what kind of resources they provide.

Go to a local community mental health centre. These clinics typically provide mental health care for little or no cost.

Contact your assistance program. Your organization's assistance program or other confidential counselling service can give you information about resources in your community and elsewhere that can help you decide what steps to take next.

Resources

[Anxiety Canada](#)

This website provides resources and information about anxiety disorders.

[Canadian Mental Health Association \(CMHA\)](#)

CMHA provides support, resources, and information for people with mental health issues and their friends and families.

[Canadian Centre of Substance Use and Addiction \(CCSA\)](#)

A wealth of information on addiction is available at the website of the CCSA.

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