



COMORBIDITY: THE FACTS

A survey conducted in 2007 revealed that one in five Australians aged 16–85 years had a mental disorder. The most common of these are anxiety, depression, and psychosis. While many people will experience an illness once and fully recover quickly, others will have recurring problems throughout their lives. It is unclear exactly what causes mental illness but there are many triggers including stress, traumatic events or physical problems such as a tumor or chemical imbalance.

People who use illicit drugs are more likely to have a mental health issue than the general population. This co-occurrence of mental health disorders and drug use is called '**comorbidity**' or 'dual diagnosis' and can present considerable complications for treatment and lead to an increase in disability and greater service utilisation.

Over the last 10 years we have learnt a lot about comorbidity. We now know that there is a strong link between mental health disorders and regular or dependant drug use. Nationally, there is a higher prevalence of substance use among people with mental health issues.

The prevalence and harm caused by co-occurring tobacco use and mental health issues is often under-emphasised. However, having a mental health problem reduces the likelihood of an individual successfully quitting smoking. People who smoke tobacco are much more likely than non-smokers to use other drugs, particularly alcohol and cannabis. This link should not be downplayed as smoking remains linked to the four leading causes of preventable death in Australia.

We also have a greater understanding of the link between cannabis use and psychotic illnesses, such as schizophrenia. Cannabis also has a strong link with more prevalent mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder but not as much is known about the relationship. Evidence suggests that regular cannabis use beginning at an early age by those who are at risk for other reasons, such as a pre-existing or dormant mental health issue, often leads to the development of mental health problems

Psychosis among regular methamphetamine (also known as ice) users is not restricted to those who have a history of mental health issues and is 11 times more likely than among

the general population. Two-thirds of methamphetamine users in Sydney in 2005 experienced some degree of mental health disability. While aggression is a well known symptom of methamphetamine use, other mental illness problems are common, such as depression, impaired memory, and poor motivation.

Comorbidity is of particular concern amongst the younger population group. Youth Services report that approximately 50-70% of young people presented with an alcohol or substance use issue also have a mental health problem. Those aged 18-24 have the highest prevalence of mental health disorders of any group and are also the most common users of drugs.

THE FIGURES ARE OUT

The National Health Survey 2004-05 found:

- among adults who reported a mental or behavioural problem, 32% were daily smokers, compared with 20% of those without
- 15% of adults with reported mental or behavioural problems also consumed alcohol at risky/high levels, compared with 13% of those without
- around one in 10 people reported that they had a long-term mental or behavioural problem; and
- nearly one fifth of adults reported using some medication for their mental wellbeing within a two week period.

The link between alcohol and drug misuse and the development of mental illness is as alarming as it is clear. Research indicating that nearly two thirds of persons who suffer from a mental disorder have never sought any professional help for mental health problems is also concerning.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing

www.health.gov.au/mentalhealth

Beyond Blue – the national depression initiative

www.beyondblue.org.au

Mental Health First Aid

www.mhfa.com.au

Mental Health and Young People

www.headroom.net.au

Mental Health Council of Australia

www.mhca.org.au

Head space – National Youth Mental Health

Foundation www.headspace.org.au



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

