Comorbidity: Addiction and Mental Illness

When two disorders or illnesses occur in the same person, simultaneously or sequentially, they are called “comorbid.” According to a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) publication, the high prevalence of comorbidity between drug use disorders and other mental illnesses does not mean that one caused the other, even if it appeared first. According to NIDA, establishing causality or directionality is difficult for several reasons. Some symptoms of a mental disorder may not be recognized until the illness has substantially progressed, and imperfect recollections of when drug use/abuse started can also present timing issues. NIDA outlines three scenarios to consider:

- Drugs of abuse can cause abusers to experience one or more symptoms of another mental illness. The increased risk of psychosis in some marijuana abusers has been offered as evidence for this possibility.

- Mental illnesses can lead to drug abuse. Individuals with overt, mild, or even subclinical mental disorders may abuse drugs as a form of self-medication. For example, the use of tobacco products by patients with schizophrenia is believed to lessen the symptoms of the disease and improve cognition.

- Both drug use disorders and other mental illnesses are caused by overlapping factors such as underlying brain deficits, genetic vulnerabilities, and/or early exposure to stress or trauma.
Correct diagnosis is critical to ensuring appropriate and effective treatment, as failure to treat a comorbid disease can jeopardize a person’s chance of recovery. To see the entire NIDA publication on comorbidity, please visit the NIDA website at www.drugabuse.gov and see NIH Publication Number 08-5771.

For further information regarding this article or other substance abuse issues, please contact Karen Kuehn Howell, Ph.D., at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, M.E.,320W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9800 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD.

The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD).