

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

Overview

Tips on how to avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope with depression or anxiety.

- What is self-medication for depression or anxiety?
- Signs of a problem
- How to get help
- Resources

Mood disorders such as depression or anxiety can cause distressing symptoms such as sleep problems, nervousness, and lack of interest in pleasurable activities. So it is not surprising that people with these common disorders sometimes medicate themselves with drugs or alcohol in an attempt to get some relief.

Unfortunately, this relief 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 get worse afterward. There is also the risk of developing a substance-abuse disorder in addition to the mental health disorder, or what is called a “dual disorder.” People with a dual disorder have even greater difficulty carrying out normal work and family responsibilities than those with either a mood disorder or a chemical dependency alone.

People with a dual disorder need to treat both the alcohol or drug dependency and the mood disorder to fully recover. If you suspect that you may be relying on alcohol or drugs too much 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.

What is self-medication for depression or anxiety?

Self-medication for depression or anxiety refers to the 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, cocaine, prescription drugs such as tranquilizers, and marijuana.

Depression and anxiety are the two most common mental health issues. About 18 percent of Americans experience anxiety and about 9 percent have depression. People with chronic depression or anxiety are at increased risk for developing an addiction. Research indicates that more than half of the people with mental health concerns also abuse drugs or alcohol. Research also suggests that there is a biological component to both mental health and addictive disorders that is related to the levels of neurotransmitters in the brain.

Signs of a problem

Common symptoms of depression and anxiety can include

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

Warning signs of a substance-abuse problem can include

- blackouts or memory lapses
- inability to stop using or to control use (for example, a person can't just have one drink or needs to use cocaine every weekend)
- interference with work tasks (for example, frequently arrives late to work because of hangovers)
- feelings of remorse after using drugs or alcohol
- preoccupation with either drugs or alcohol

Remember that not everyone who self-medicates has a substance-abuse problem or experiences the symptoms listed above. To determine whether you are self-medicating, you might think about your particular pattern of drug or alcohol use and whether you have any of the 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, perhaps you feel sad and have low energy in the evenings unless you use cocaine before coming home from work.

How to get help

It can often be difficult to acknowledge that there may be a problem. It is normal for people to think, “I am just going through a bad time right now, but it will go away.” Sometimes looking at the length of time you’ve been using drugs or alcohol can be helpful in realizing that it is time to deal with the issues. If you identify with any of the symptoms or behaviors associated with substance abuse or addiction, don’t attempt to diagnose yourself. Depression and anxiety can be caused by situational life events, such as job loss or a child going off to college, but they don’t have to be. Whatever your experience is, it’s important to remember that treatment is available to support you.

If it is the first time that you are seeking help, you may not know what to expect. Stopping certain behaviors, even when you recognize that they are not helpful, can be challenging. By seeking help, you are not making the decision to stop self-medicating immediately; rather, you are giving yourself the opportunity to find out what assistance is available to you. And if and when you do decide to stop, multiple treatment options are available. Psychotherapy and support groups are often an option, and sometimes people find that using appropriate medications instead of alcohol and drugs can help alleviate the problems for which they were using alcohol and/or drugs to cope.

But each person in recovery has different needs, depending on the nature and severity of his or her 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.

As a first step, you might try the following options:

- *Contact the program that provided this publication.* Your employee assistance program or the program that provided this publication can set up an appointment with a professional with an advanced degree in psychology or social work. This counselor can both assess whether you have a substance-abuse problem and/or mental health concerns and provide emotional support. He or she can also make referrals for further treatment.
- *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, in many managed-care plans, your primary care physician will need to authorize these services. Contacting your health care provider is very important because he or she can conduct a thorough medical exam to rule out any underlying medical problems. This can be critical because the symptoms of anxiety and depression can sometimes be caused by medical problems.
- *Get an evaluation at a substance-abuse treatment facility.* To find out about treatment facilities in your area, you might contact the Substance Abuse and

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Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a federal agency, at www.samhsa.gov.

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

Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

www.adaa.org

Resources and information about anxiety disorders.

Double Trouble in Recovery (DTR)

www.doubletroubleinrecovery.org

A 12-step program for people with dual disorders.

Dual Recovery Anonymous

www.draonline.org

A 12-step program for people with dual disorders. The Web site contains a state-by-state listing of Dual Recovery Anonymous meetings.

Mental Health America

800-273-TALK (800-273-8255)

www.nmha.org

Support, resources, and information for people with mental health issues and their loved ones.

National Alliance on Mentally Illness

800-950-6264

www.nami.org

Information and support for people with a variety of mental health disorders, including dual disorder.

National Institute on Drug Abuse

www.nida.nih.gov

A wealth of information on addiction.

Written with the help of Alice Snyder, CEAP, M.Ed. Ms. Snyder is a clinical supervisor at Ceridian. She has worked in the mental health field in both in- and out-patient settings for more than 30 years.