

The Link between PTSD and Substance Abuse

PTSD and substance abuse are closely connected for many people, yet this link often goes unrecognized. Below is some information that may be helpful to you.

◆ **You are not alone!** For people with substance abuse, PTSD is one of the most common dual diagnoses. Among women in treatment for substance abuse, 30%–59% have current PTSD. Among men in substance abuse treatment, 11%–38% have current PTSD.

◆ **There are many reasons why people with PTSD abuse substances:** to access feelings or memories, or the opposite—to escape from feelings or memories; to get through the day; to compensate for the pain of PTSD; to commit “slow suicide”; because they grew up with substance abuse in the family; because they don’t care about taking care of their bodies.

◆ **People with PTSD and substance abuse tend to abuse the most dangerous substances:** cocaine and opiates.

◆ **Gender differences:** Women with PTSD and substance abuse typically experienced childhood physical and/or sexual abuse; men with both disorders typically experienced crime victimization or war trauma.

◆ **Two main themes of both disorders are secrecy and control.** “Secrecy” means you may feel ashamed and wish to keep your problems a secret (e.g., the traumas you experienced, the amount of your substance use). “Control” refers to the idea that with trauma and substance abuse, you feel out of control. In PTSD, a terrible event occurred that you neither chose nor wanted; in substance abuse, you have lost control over your ability to stop using. Learning the skills of honesty and regaining control are thus important for healing.

◆ **Each of the disorders makes the other more likely.** If you have PTSD, you are at increased risk for substance abuse. If you have substance abuse, you are at increased risk for trauma. It is thus important to try to keep yourself safe to prevent further trauma and substance abuse.

◆ **The relationship between PTSD and substance abuse is complex.** Using substances can either increase or decrease the PTSD symptoms. Yet abstinence from substances can also either increase or decrease the PTSD symptoms. Try to notice the patterns that occur for you. Getting to know the relationship between the two disorders in your life can help you cope better with the recovery process.

◆ **Why do PTSD and substance abuse occur together?** Four patterns are common:

1. *PTSD can lead to substance abuse.* To overcome the terrible symptoms of PTSD, you may use substances to “self-medicate”—to try to feel better. For example, you may have begun using alcohol to get to sleep at night.

2. *Substance abuse can lead to PTSD.* If you abuse substances, you may be vulnerable to dangerous traumatic situations because your “guard is down” or your self-esteem is low—for example, getting drunk at a bar and going home with a stranger who assaults you.

3. *PTSD and substance abuse may have both occurred together.* Some people grew up in a home where family members abused substances and also hurt each other.

4. *PTSD and substance abuse can be connected in a “downward spiral.”* PTSD can lead you to use substances; by using substances, you are at increased risk for more trauma; if more trauma happens, you may use more substances to “cope” . . . and so on.

The “big picture” priorities in this treatment:

★ **Eliminate substance use**

★ **Learn to manage PTSD**

★ **Become safe**

You can heal from both PTSD and substance abuse!