

## Dual Diagnosis - Information for Families

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The term "Dual Diagnosis" refers to simultaneous diagnoses of substance abuse co-occurring with another mental illness (depression, schizophrenia, etc.). A person with a dual diagnosis often faces even greater challenges than a person coping with either substance abuse or mental illness alone. Often the two issues (substance abuse and mental illness) exacerbate one another and increase the severity of both disorders. Use of alcohol or drugs may set off an acute episode of mental illness, and may intensify its symptoms. Conversely, persons suffering from a mental illness often "self-medicate", turning to drugs or alcohol to try to feel better. For some general thoughts on dealing with a loved one's diagnosis of a mental illness, please see our ["Mental Illness - Information for Families"](#) page. Denial is frequently encountered in regard to both mental illness and substance abuse, and is often present in the dually diagnosed. The affected individual is unable or refuses to see that they have a problem, let alone that they have two problems that compound each other. Getting through the denial is often an important step in the treatment of the dually diagnosed. Another difficulty faced by the dually diagnosed comes in terms of treatment and support. Many persons involved in 12-step groups believe that taking psychotropic medication (such as is prescribed for mental illness) is "taking drugs" and is therefore not acceptable in a program of sobriety. The dually diagnosed person is generally following a doctor's orders in taking medication which may be essential to their health and well being. Yet they may find themselves under a great deal of pressure from others in the field of sobriety to "get off the drugs". Sometimes they follow this well-meaning advice, only to find themselves in an acute relapse of their mental illness, which may then precipitate another relapse into substance abuse. Treatment of the dually diagnosed involves a two pronged approach, working with both the mental illness and the substance abuse disorders. Coping skills for dealing with mental illness, including medication management, symptom management, and relapse prevention, are essential for the dually diagnosed person. Similarly, relapse prevention skills, an understanding of triggers for substance abuse, and coping skills to prevent relapse and maintain sobriety, are also equally essential. Active participation in a supportive 12-step program is also an excellent adjunct to treatment. Inpatient treatment may be necessary and warranted by severe cases. Persons with a dual diagnosis are truly carrying a "double burden", and face additional challenges. Yet with proper treatment, support, and a commitment to recovery, the dually diagnosed person can make and maintain successful recovery.

**If your family member is out of control or suicidal (danger of harm to self or others), stay calm and call 911. Do not try to handle it alone.**