

Substance Abuse and Trauma



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KEYWORDS

• Trauma • PTSD • Substance abuse • Chemical dependency • Integrated treatment

KEY POINTS

- Traumatic experiences and substance abuse are both common among teenagers. When they occur together, complex and challenging clinical presentations can result.
- The relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance use disorders can be bidirectional, and the 2 issues can reinforce each other.
- An integrated, multisystem treatment approach for teens with cooccurring PTSD and substance use disorders is recommended.

INTRODUCTION

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are highly comorbid with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The relationship between substance abuse and trauma is complex and bidirectional, with shared social risk factors and biological pathways. Youth with cooccurring PTSD and SUD often have more severe challenges than teens with either disorder alone, with treatment needs that may involve multiple community systems. Integrated treatment principles and recommendations are discussed. Two clinical cases are reviewed to illustrate these treatment principles.

EPIDEMIOLOGY

At least 1 in 4 children experiences a significant traumatic event during childhood; some estimates are significantly higher.¹ The lifetime prevalence of drug abuse or dependence in teens has been found to range from 3.3% to 9.8%.² Substance use rates among teens remain high, although rates of teen alcohol use have decreased

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Abbreviations

CRF	Corticotrophin-releasing factor
DSM-V	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition
PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
SUD	Substance use disorder

somewhat in recent years. **Table 1** shows the 2011 and 2014 lifetime and past-month rates of alcohol and cannabis use in 12-grade students.³

A multitude of studies have observed a link between traumatic experiences and substance abuse. In the National Survey of Adolescents, 24% of girls and almost 30% of boys with PTSD had comorbid substance abuse or dependence. Out of boys and girls with substance abuse or dependence, 13% and 25%, respectively, also had PTSD.⁴ In a retrospective study of more than 8000 adults, respondents with more than 5 adverse childhood experiences were 7 to 10 times more likely to report illicit drug use problems. An increasing adverse childhood experience score was associated with earlier initiation of illicit drug use as well as drug addiction.⁵

CLINICAL PRESENTATION***Posttraumatic Stress Disorder***

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition* (DSM-V), a diagnosis of PTSD requires symptoms in 4 different clusters: intrusion symptoms, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and marked alterations in arousal and reactivity.⁶ However, youth who have experienced trauma may have a wide range of clinical symptoms, and are at an increased risk for a broad array of clinical sequelae and functional impairment, beyond or in addition to PTSD (**Box 1**).¹

Many youth demonstrate symptoms of PTSD in the first month after a trauma, but fewer than one-third continue to have symptoms thereafter.¹ Interpersonal traumas, such as sexual assault or violence, are more likely to result in PTSD than noninterpersonal traumas. Family adversity, prior traumas, and pretrauma anxiety may predict the onset of PTSD.⁷ Complex trauma is defined as multiple simultaneous or sequential traumas within the caretaking environment, beginning in childhood, as well as the multidomain impairment and symptomatology that often result. The domains of impairment include attachment, biology, affect regulation, dissociation, behavioral control, cognition, and self-concept.⁸ Beyond problems with PTSD, depression, and substance abuse, youth who have experienced polyvictimization are at greater risk for behavioral and legal problems.⁹

Substance Use Disorder

Many teens experiment with drugs and alcohol. To meet criteria for a SUD, according to the DSM-5, teens must display at least 2 of 11 possible symptoms over a 12-month

Table 1
Rates of alcohol and cannabis use in 12th graders

	Past-Month Alcohol (%)	Lifetime Alcohol (%)	Past-Month Marijuana (%)	Lifetime Marijuana (%)
2011	40	70	22.6	45.5
2014	37.4	66	21.2	44.4

Data from National Institute on Drug Abuse. High School and Youth Trends. Available at: www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/high-school-youth-trends. Accessed September 30, 2015.

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