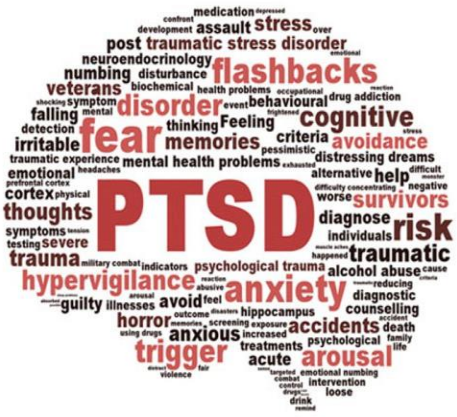

Trauma and Substance Abuse

By Nina Gallivan

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse have a close and complex relationship, yet often times this link can go unrecognized. For people with substance abuse, PTSD is one of the most common dual diagnosis. A further understanding of the complexity of this relationship can, and should, be carried through to the treatment of both disorders in order to provide the most effective care.

One of the most common myths about PTSD is that it is primarily a symptom of war veterans. While PTSD can stem from war, it is not the only cause of PTSD. PTSD can stem from any traumatic event, and refers to the set of emotional problems that can occur after someone has experienced a terrible, stressful life event. Traumatic events can include, but are not limited to, childhood abuse or neglect, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, accidents, natural disasters, grief and loss, witnessing acts of violence, war and other forms of violence. According to the National Counsel for Community Behavioral Healthcare, 70% of adults have experienced some type of traumatic event at least once in their lives; that is 223.4 million people.

While everyone who has experienced trauma will respond to the event in some way, some can be overwhelmed and have difficulty regaining control. Traumatic events can lead to physical, emotional and mental symptoms. Physical symptoms can include headaches, stomachaches, sweating, heart palpitations, gastrointestinal disturbances, and lowered immune system while emotional and mental symptoms can include fear, depression, anxiety, outbursts of anger or rage, emotional swings, nightmares or flashbacks, isolation, loss of trust, fear of betrayal, fear of the event occurring again, self-blame, shame, and suicidal thoughts. Another common symptom can include the increased use of alcohol and/or other drugs.

Research supports the theory that trauma is one of the pathways to substance abuse. The rate of PTSD among patients in substance treatment is 12%-34%; for women it is 30%-59%. Rates of trauma within the lifetime are much higher, estimates suggest as many as 80% of women seeking treatment for substance abuse report lifetime histories of sexual and/or physical assault. The reason behind this correlation is that people may attempt to suppress, manage, or numb the symptoms of trauma. This “self-medication” can provide immediate relief from the symptoms; however, the relief is temporary and can lead to more problems, including substance abuse problems and further trauma.

One of the most important things to keep in mind is that people can, and do, recover from trauma and people can, and do, recover from substance abuse. An integrated model—treating both disorders at the same time—is recommended as being most likely to succeed.

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