

"Understanding mental health disorders can help us make sense of the seemingly nonsensical." - Amy Morin

Session 14

Understanding Mental Health, Substance Use Disorder and Co-Occurring Disorders

Expanded Understanding of Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

1. Genetic Predisposition—how Genetics Influence SUD:

- **Inherited Vulnerability:** Research indicates that genetics can account for approximately 40-60% of an individual's susceptibility to SUD. This includes inherited traits that may affect the brain's reward system, making some people more likely to experience pleasure from substances.
- **Family Studies:** Studies of families, twins, and adopted individuals show higher rates of substance use disorders among biological relatives compared to non-biological relatives.
- **Specific Genetic Markers:** Scientists are identifying specific genes that may modulate risk for SUD, affecting how substances are metabolized or how rewarding they are.

Implications for Treatment:

- Understanding genetic factors can help in personalizing treatment approaches, such as pharmacogenomics, which tailors medication choices based on an individual's genetic makeup.

2. Environmental Influences—Key Environmental Factors

- **Family Dynamics:** Exposure to substance use in the family can normalize the behavior or serve as a coping mechanism for family dysfunction or stress.
- **Peer Pressure:** Especially during adolescence, peers play a significant role in an individual's likelihood to experiment with substances.
- **Socioeconomic Factors:** Lower socioeconomic status, lack of access to education, and unemployment are linked to higher risks of developing SUD.
- **Cultural and Legal Aspects:** Cultural attitudes towards substance use and the legal status of various substances can influence their use and misuse.

Preventive Measures:

- Community and school-based programs that focus on resilience and coping strategies can mitigate some environmental risks.
- Policies aimed at reducing substance availability and improving economic opportunities can also play a role in prevention.

3. Psychological Factors—Common Psychological Trigger

- **Mental Health Disorders:** Conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and PTSD often co-occur with SUD, sometimes as a form of self-medication.
- **Stress:** Chronic stress, whether from work, relationships, or financial pressures, increases substance use as individuals seek relief.
- **Trauma:** History of trauma, especially childhood abuse and neglect, significantly correlates with an increased risk of substance use.
- **Personality Traits:** Traits such as high impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and low harm avoidance are associated with higher risk of SUD.

Therapeutic Approaches:

- Psychological counseling, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), can address underlying issues such as trauma and stress.
- Integrated treatment that addresses both SUD and co-occurring mental health disorders simultaneously can enhance outcomes.

Exploring Mental Health Disorders in More Detail

To better understand mental health disorders, it's important to explore several key aspects: the types of disorders, their symptoms, causes, and treatment strategies. This detailed exploration can help tailor effective interventions and promote broader understanding and empathy.

Types of Disorders

1. Mood Disorders:

- **Major Depressive Disorder:** Characterized by persistent feelings of sadness and a lack of interest in external activities.
- **Bipolar Disorder:** Involves significant mood swings, including manic phases (elevated mood and hyperactivity) and depressive phases.

2. Anxiety Disorders:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD):** Constant, severe anxiety that interferes with daily activities.
- **Panic Disorder:** Recurrent panic attacks marked by a sudden onset of fear and physical symptoms like chest pain and shortness of breath.

- **Social Anxiety Disorder:** Intense fear of social situations due to feelings of embarrassment, self-consciousness, and concern about being judged or viewed negatively by others.

3. Psychotic Disorders:

- **Schizophrenia:** Often manifests as hallucinations, delusions, and extremely disordered thinking and behavior.
- **Schizoaffective Disorder:** Combines symptoms of schizophrenia with mood disorder episodes (depression or mania).

4. Personality Disorders:

- **Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD):** Features instability in relationships, self-image, and affect, along with impulsivity.
- **Antisocial Personality Disorder:** A lack of regard for the moral or legal standards in the local culture, manifesting as a failure to conform to these norms.

5. Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders:

- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD):** Characterized by unwanted repeated thoughts (obsessions) and/or actions (compulsions).

- **Hoarding Disorder:** Persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value, due to a perceived need to save them and distress associated with discarding them.

6. Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders:

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** Can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which there was the potential for or actual occurrence of grave physical harm.
- **Adjustment Disorders:** Occur in response to a significant life change or stressor, resulting in symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems that are disproportionate to the stressor.

7. Eating Disorders:

- **Anorexia Nervosa:** Characterized by an abnormally low body weight, an intense fear of gaining weight, and a distorted perception of body weight or shape.
- **Bulimia Nervosa:** Involves episodes of binge eating followed by behaviors that compensate for the overeating, such as forced vomiting, excessive exercise, or extreme use of laxatives or diuretics.

Causes and Risk Factors Mental health disorders can result from a variety of factors:

- **Genetic:** Many disorders have a genetic component, meaning they can run in families.

- **Biological:** Neurochemical imbalances, brain abnormalities, and hormonal imbalances can contribute to mental health issues.
- **Environmental:** Exposure to violence, persistent stress, and poverty can increase the risk of developing mental health problems.
- **Psychological and social:** Childhood neglect, abuse, and trauma are significant risk factors for many mental health disorders. Social isolation and loneliness can also exacerbate symptoms.

Treatment and Management

Effective treatment varies widely and is often tailored to the individual:

1. **Psychotherapy:**

- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** Helps patients recognize and change detrimental thought patterns and behaviors.
- **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT):** Used primarily for borderline personality disorder, improving emotional regulation and mindfulness.
- **Psychodynamic Therapy:** Focuses on exploring the psychological roots of emotional suffering.

2. **Medication:**

- **Antidepressants, Antipsychotics, Anxiolytics, Mood Stabilizers:** Used to treat symptoms of disorders like depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, and bipolar disorder.

3. Lifestyle Modifications:

- **Exercise, Diet, and Sleep Hygiene:** Can significantly impact mental health and are often used in conjunction with other treatment methods.

4. Supportive Services:

- **Group Therapy and Support Groups:** Provide a platform for sharing experiences and receiving support.
- **Inpatient and Residential Treatment Programs:** Provide intensive care for more severe cases.

5. Emerging Treatories:

- **Neurostimulation Therapies (e.g., TMS):** Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) and other forms of brain stimulation have shown promise in treating depression and other disorders.
- **Integrative Medicine Approaches:** Such as meditation, acupuncture, and yoga, which can help manage symptoms and improve overall well-being.

Conclusion

Mental health disorders encompass a wide range of conditions that can affect mood, thinking, and behavior. These conditions are complex and can arise from a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Treatment is equally diverse and can include a combination of psychotherapy, medication, lifestyle changes, and supportive services. Understanding the nuances of these disorders is key to effectively treating individuals and improving their quality of life.

Important to Note: As an FSP, while it may be beneficial to be aware of different types of mental health disorder, it is never part of an FSP's scope of practice to attempt to make a MH diagnosis.

Interaction Between SUD and Mental Health Disorders

The interaction between Substance Use Disorders (SUD) and mental health disorders is intricate and bidirectional, with each potentially influencing the onset and progression of the other. This relationship is often referred to as co-occurring disorders or dual diagnosis. Understanding the dynamics of this interaction is crucial for effective treatment planning and intervention.

Mechanisms of Interactions

1. Self-Medication Hypothesis:

- Individuals with mental health disorders may use alcohol or drugs as a way to alleviate their symptoms. For example, a person with anxiety might use alcohol to reduce their feelings of nervousness, or someone with depression might use stimulants to alleviate feelings of low mood or lethargy.
- While substance use might provide temporary relief, over time it can exacerbate the underlying mental health disorder, leading to a worsening of symptoms when the substance's effects wear off.

2. Shared Vulnerability Model:

- Both SUD and mental health disorders may stem from overlapping genetic vulnerabilities, similar brain chemistry alterations, or early environmental stressors such as trauma or stress.
- Neurobiological factors, such as disruptions in the brain's dopamine systems, can predispose individuals to both substance use and other mental health disorders.

3. Substance-Induced Deterioration:

- Chronic substance use can lead to changes in brain function that might result in the development of mental health symptoms. For example, prolonged alcohol use can lead to neurological impairments that manifest as depression or anxiety disorders.
- Certain substances, particularly stimulants like methamphetamine, can induce psychotic symptoms, while long-term use of substances can lead to cognitive impairments, mood disorders, or anxiety disorders.

4. Exacerbation and Masking:

- Substance use can mask the symptoms of mental health disorders, making diagnosis and treatment more complicated. For instance, it can be challenging to diagnose depression if substance use is a predominant factor because the substance's effects can mimic or obscure the symptoms of depression.
- Conversely, mental health issues can also worsen the course of SUD, as impaired judgment and increased impulsivity may lead to higher consumption levels and riskier substance use behaviors.

Treatment Considerations

1. Integrated Treatment Approach:

- Effective treatment for co-occurring disorders involves addressing both the SUD and the mental health disorder simultaneously. This approach can help prevent the cycle where treatment for one disorder exacerbates the other.
- Therapies such as integrated group therapy, which combines skills from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for substance use and mental health, have proven effective.

2. Medication Management:

- Careful medication management is essential, as some medications used to treat mental health disorders can be potentially addictive or interact negatively with substances the patient might be using.
- Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) for substance use disorders, such as buprenorphine for opioid addiction or naltrexone for alcohol dependence, should be considered within the broader context of the patient's mental health.

3. Supportive Services:

- Beyond direct treatment, supportive services such as case management, housing support, and employment assistance can improve outcomes for individuals with dual diagnoses.
- Peer support groups specifically for individuals with dual diagnosis can also provide understanding and reinforcement of positive lifestyle changes.

Conclusion

The co-occurrence of SUD and mental health disorders requires a comprehensive, coordinated treatment approach tailored to the individual's specific needs. By recognizing the complex relationship between these disorders, healthcare providers can better support their patients through more effective and integrated treatment strategies, ultimately leading to improved outcomes and enhanced quality of life.

Review Questions for Video Course Session 14

- 1. How much of an individual's vulnerability to substance use disorder is estimated to be due to genetic factors?**
- 2. Which therapeutic approach is specifically designed to treat both SUD and co-occurring mental health disorders?**
- 3. What are some examples of mental health disorders?**
- 4. What are some cause and risk factors for mental health disorders?**