



Dual Diagnosis 101

Overview

People who experience a developmental disability and a mental health concern are often referred to as people who experience *dual diagnosis*. There are a couple of ways that dual diagnosis has been defined throughout history. The most common use of dual diagnosis refers to people who have been diagnosed with a mental health concern and also experience substance abuse.³ At the Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities National Training Center; we define dual diagnosis as an individual that experiences a developmental disability and a mental health concern.

30-35% of individuals with developmental disabilities also experience mental health concerns.⁴

Developmental Disabilities

"Developmental Disabilities" is an umbrella term that includes intellectual disability but also includes other disabilities that are apparent during childhood.

Developmental disabilities are severe chronic disabilities that can be cognitive, or physical, or both. The disabilities appear before the age of 22 and are likely to be lifelong experiences. Some developmental disabilities are largely physical issues, such as cerebral palsy or epilepsy. Some individuals may have a condition that includes a physical and intellectual disability, for example Down syndrome or fetal alcohol syndrome.

Intellectual disability encompasses the "cognitive" part of this definition, that is, a disability that is broadly related to thought processes. Because intellectual and other developmental disabilities often co-occur,

intellectual disability professionals often work with people who have both types of disabilities.¹

Mental Health

Mental health diagnoses are outlined by the American Psychiatric Association in their book *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-V)*.² This book covers a wide range of mental health experiences and outlines the symptoms that people may have with each mental health diagnosis. These symptoms can be experienced by any person throughout their life.

Challenges

There are several challenges that people experiencing dual diagnosis and those that provide services to them face.

One of the concerns that professionals have when working with people with dual diagnosis is making sure to get it right. Providers have to work hard to make sure they identify and interpret the experiences of their clients correctly so they can effectively help those they work with. This can be difficult to navigate for the professional because of something called *diagnostic overshadowing*. Diagnostic overshadowing happens when a professional decides that what a person is experiencing with their mental health (or physical health) is because of their disability, not because they are having an additional mental health concern.⁵ This means that the professionals aren't looking at the person as an individual outside of their disability and aren't acknowledging the true experiences of the person they are serving.

Part of the reason that professionals overlook the true mental health experiences of people

with developmental disabilities is partially due to the lack of research surrounding the topic. There aren't many sources of research and the research that is out there can't keep up with the needs of the field. Without the needed research and training, professionals are unable to keep up with the demands of those that are seeking services.

Diagnostic overshadowing is one concern for individuals experiencing dual diagnosis. If professionals don't take their concerns seriously, someone may not receive the help that they are seeking. Communicating needs is also a concern for people experiencing dual diagnosis because sometimes it is difficult to describe our experiences to others. This goes back to the idea that professionals may not take the concerns seriously. If it is difficult to explain what you are feeling, a professional may not take the time to truly understand why you are seeking services.

Promising Practices & Future Directions

There are organizations that are making efforts in educating professionals, research, supports, and much more.

One of the organizations influencing the field of dual diagnosis is the Center for START Services (START). START is housed at the University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability.⁷ They provide research and training related to dual diagnosis for professionals serving people experiencing dual diagnosis.

Another group supporting people experiencing dual diagnosis is NADD, an association for persons with developmental disabilities and mental health needs.⁶ NADD is an organization that advocates for people who experience developmental disabilities and mental health needs. They accomplish this by providing training and education for professionals and family members of people who experience dual diagnosis. They are leaders in this field and provide important services for those who need it most.

Finally, you have us, here, at the Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities National Training Center! Our goal is to “promote quality mental health care and supports for people with developmental disabilities by providing access to information, resources, and training.”⁸ Our organization is continuing to grow and we are excited for the amazing services that will be here soon. We will provide written work, a podcast series, social media, webinars, training, and so much more! We hope to expand the resources for individuals with developmental disabilities and mental health concerns, professionals, paraprofessionals, family members, friends, community members, and other allies.

Contributors

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