

When Your Eating Disorder Co-Presents With Substance Abuse

Article from Gemma Taylor

Suffering from an eating disorder is a serious standalone issue that can be very difficult to overcome, and this shouldn't be minimised. [The National Institute for Anorexia Nervosa reports that at least 30 million individuals of all ages and genders \(people are often surprised to learn that eating disorders can affect men too\) suffer from an eating disorder in the U.S and that one person in the country will die from the condition every 62 minutes. However for some individuals with eating disorders, there can also be other factors at play.](#)

Eating disorders often co-present with substance abuse issues: whilst the two conditions may seem strikingly different, it's easy to see similarities. Both disorders have their roots in issues surrounding control and some substances (cocaine for example) can help to control hunger and speed up weight loss, whilst cannabis can help to control the anxiety that is a frequent part of an eating disorder, meaning that what may begin as a straightforward eating disorder could quickly develop into a substance abuse disorder in conjunction. If you are overcoming both an eating disorder and a substance abuse issue then your dual diagnosis may well, initially at least, need two different forms of treatment: a holistic detoxification to purify your body of any drugs you have taken, and nutritherapy to help you to focus on eating a well-balanced diet. Cognitive therapy to address the root causes of your conditions will also be incredibly beneficial, as focusing on the symptoms rather than the cause is unlikely to lead to long term, life-long results.

Assessing Your Nutritional Needs

Whilst there are many shared characteristics between eating disorders and substance abuse, the way the two conditions are treated is very distinct, which means when it comes to treatment and recovery it is sometimes best to look at the two conditions individually. Until recently, eating disorders and substance abuse were rarely considered to be co-presenting conditions and very few specialists thought to screened for the presence of both conditions. The nutritional needs of an individual with an eating disorder may well be different from the nutritional needs of an individual struggling with substance abuse, however [a holistic approach should be taken](#) to dealing with both conditions in one individual and ensuring that you find a diet plan that works for you, and is manageable for you.

We are able [to offer a high level of nutritherapy](#) which can help our clients to break the binge purge cycle, to redevelop a positive relationship with food and to enjoy the right foods, and to develop a positive relationship with your body and a positive attitude to your real and perceived body image. Whilst this is a process that will have obvious benefits to the individual who is suffering from an eating disorder, it will also have proven benefits for the individual with a substance abuse disorder. Individuals who turn to substance abuse often have low self-esteem and struggle to cope with sudden life transitions, so they seek something external to help them control their emotions around these new situations. When assessed in this context, it is clear to see how dietary controls and coping mechanisms can help to overcome many of the long term symptoms of the condition.

The Differences Between the Two Conditions

Whilst it is essential that co-presenting eating disorders and substance abuse disorders have very many similarities and should be treated under a holistic umbrella, looking at the unique needs of the individuals, there are [also many differences between the two conditions](#). One of the areas where this difference is most apparent is in recovery: the substance abuser is told to abstain from their poison of choice, whereas the individual with an eating disorder cannot abstain from eating food. That means that whilst substance abusers should abstain from the cause of their issue, those with an eating disorder should abstain from the symptoms. (Rigid dieting, starvation, purging etc.). It is also important to note that both conditions are viewed so differently by society: those with substance abuse disorders are villainized whilst those with eating disorders are infantilized. Both approaches pose unique issues, and finding the right therapist to help you overcome this stigma, whilst also taking care of your wellbeing and nutritional needs, is essential.