

# The Unique Needs of Youth with Co-Occurring Mental Health & Substance Use Disorders

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Tragically, youth with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders and their families rarely get the kind of help they need when they need it. The National Co-Morbidity Survey in the 1990's found that in 85% of people with co-occurring disorders, the mental disorder developed first<sup>1</sup>. This implies that people are self-medicating their depression, anxiety, confusion, and disturbing behaviors and thoughts.

## Substance use in youth with mental health challenges

- Individuals with no mental health problems who become involved with alcohol and/or drugs use them because they want to change the way they feel<sup>2</sup>.
- For depressed or anxious, shy, fearful, or hyperactive children and youth, the motivation for drug use is very different. They are just trying to feel normal<sup>3</sup>.
- Mental health symptoms can be temporarily relieved by 'medicating' with drugs and alcohol. However, as drugs wear off, the rebound tends to make the original bad feelings even worse, which causes a double motivation to use more and more drugs and alcohol<sup>4</sup>.

## Why are these youth not receiving effective treatment?

- Funding streams to agencies are siloed. Substance abuse agencies at the federal, state and local levels will fund agencies focusing on substance use treatment. The same is true for mental health funding streams. In many cases, conditions attached to the spending of these funds makes it difficult or impossible for treatment to be integrated for the individual with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders<sup>5</sup>.
- Stigma. Many youth want to get better, but react strongly to the inhumane way they are treated and become resistant to participation in a treatment program.
- Youth treatment programs for substance abuse and mental health disorders are based on an adult model, which have principles that are inappropriate for adolescents who are not developmentally ready to take the level of personal responsibility required.

## Providing the right services and supports early in youths' lives would be an effective way to prevent substance abuse.

- The National Federation's 2001 survey of youth with co-occurring disorders found that peer-to-peer support for both youth and families, accurate and useful information for both youth and families, and combined treatment that includes families would help to yield better outcomes<sup>6</sup>.
- Most importantly, youth and their families want to be heard and respected. They want a say in deciding what services and supports they will receive, as well as where and how they will be provided<sup>7</sup>.



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<sup>1</sup> Kessler, R.C. (1994). The National Comorbidity Survey of the United States. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 6, 365-376.

<sup>2</sup> *Blamed and Ashamed*, Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. Alexandria, VA. 2001.

<sup>3</sup> FFCMH, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> FFCMH, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> FFCMH, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> FFCMH, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> FFCMH, 2001.