The Risk of Substance Abuse When Coping With ADHD

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The Link Between ADHD and Substance Abuse

With all of the rumors, legends, myths and misinformation that exist about attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), it can be difficult to know what is fact and what is fiction. Do kids with ADHD really need a specialized diet that cuts out gluten, dyes and preservatives? Does watching too much TV really cause ADHD? Is ADHD a result of poor parenting? Is ADHD even a real disorder or a fabrication used to sell billions of dollars in medications?

To help someone with ADHD, you are tasked with sorting through the information. Forget about ideas of “right and wrong” and “good and bad” to begin seeking information that will be helpful to you or the person with ADHD in your life. Not all information applies to all people.

One topic that should be a focus on your investigation is the link between people with ADHD and substance abuse. Over the years, some have thought of this link as a myth while others held a steadfast believe in the association. Then, the believers of this had differences regarding what caused the link and what could be done to improve the life of those affected.

The goal of this article is to sift though the information available on the subject to address three points. Is there a relationship between ADHD and substance abuse? If so, why does this correlation exist? Finally, what can be done to prevent abuse and treat the symptoms if they have already begun?

Look at the Facts

Studies have uncovered a great deal of interesting findings about ADHD and substance abuse including:

- Children with ADHD are more likely to engage in alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use by early adolescence than peers of the same age without an ADHD diagnosis.
- ADHD is shown to speed the progression from first use to full abuse or dependence on a substance
- People with ADHD are three times more likely to use nicotine.
- Adults with ADHD also have an alcohol abuse or dependence disorder at rates between 17% to 45%. This means that between 1 in 5 and 1 in 2 adults with ADHD will have an issue with alcohol.
- Adults with ADHD also have a drug abuse or dependence disorder at rates between 9% and 30%. This means that between 1 in 10 and 1 and 3 adults with ADHD will have an issue with drugs other than alcohol.

- Of the people with ADHD that use substances, only 30% of them use the drugs to “get high.” The majority of people are using drugs as a form of self-medication to improve their mood, help with sleep or improve their ADHD symptoms in some way.

With this evidence, it seems clear that people with ADHD are more likely than the general population to have

greater rates of substance abuse that begin at earlier ages. The facts have been confirmed.

Next page: reasons for the link and solutions.

Reasons for the Link

Now that the link between ADHD and substance use is proven, the interest shifts to finding and understanding the reasons that the link exists. Rather than having one unified theory, researchers have presented several alternatives that could trigger the relationship alone or in combination with one another. They include:

- ADHD is associated with doing poorly in school and doing poorly professionally. This constant sense of not performing well or not “living up to their potential” leads to feelings of low self-esteem, poor confidence and low self-worth. Universally, these factors contribute to higher substance use.
- People with ADHD typically have poor social skills. These inadequate abilities to relate to others leads to feelings of isolation, loneliness and less connection to the people around them. Isolation and depression are related to higher risk of substance abuse.
- Others believe that people with ADHD have a decreased ability to feel pleasure from everyday life experiences. This has to do with a theory that a neurotransmitter that makes people feel good, dopamine, is released in smaller doses for people with ADHD. The feeling that they are missing something would encourage them to seek out other means of pleasure including risky behaviors and drugs.
- People with ADHD may seek out alcohol and other drugs as a means of self-medication to improve their symptoms. Stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamines can yield improved symptoms in the short-term. Of course in the long-term, they only create dependency and actually worsen ADHD symptoms.

These theories provide a clear explanation for the link between ADHD and substance abuse that is logical and easy to grasp. Knowing why something happens is important, but not enough to stop the trend.

Solutions to the Problem

To stop the trend of people with ADHD being at higher risk for substance abuse, you need effective treatment. Treatment is broken up into four categories, which fortunately, can be used alone or in harmony to achieve the desired benefits: life with fewer ADHD symptoms and no substance abuse. They include:

Medication

Some people think that stimulant medication for ADHD serves as a gateway drug that results in the child becoming involved with others types of drugs. People point to findings that almost 25% of children on stimulant medication will be asked to sell or trade their medication. Other findings show that children who are prescribed stimulant medication are at lower risk of developing substance abuse. This could be due to a lessened need to self-medicate. If the child can perform well in school, build relationships and find pleasure in life with assistance from medication, there will be no need to experiment with illegal drugs. The majority of people prescribed stimulant medication for ADHD does quite well with them and have limited side effects if any.

Next page: therapy and group support.

Solutions to the Problem

Therapy

A therapist can look at the whole picture of the person with ADHD. Oftentimes, people with ADHD have co-occurring mental health disorders like oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), which presents as decreased ability to follow directions and listen to authority figures; depression, which lowers self-esteem; and anxiety disorders, which promote a sense of discomfort with self and worry.

The therapy can treat the co-occurring disorders and ADHD simultaneously to improve the overall well-being of the client. This way, the risk factors shrink dramatically and the person with ADHD can live a happier, more fulfilling life.

Physical Health

Taking care of your body is always a great way to take care of your mind. Having a diet that stresses the importance of protein over sugar and carbohydrates will do a lot to maintain blood sugar. Fewer blood sugar changes means more consistent mood and energy throughout the day. Eating smaller meals more frequently will provide the same results.

Exercise is a fantastic way to lessen the risk factors associated with substance use because it will improve your mood, self-esteem and anxiety while connecting you to other people and the world around you. When it comes to ADHD, many people benefit from increased activity to use up excessive energy so that they can focus afterwards.

Group Support

If the substance use, abuse, dependence or addition has already begun, group supports are a source of great assistance. Groups are available to address mental health concerns related to ADHD. Also, they are available to address alcohol and other drugs concerns. Group systems like AA and NA are widely used with good success and a national network. Many people find that being accountable to others aids in their ability to make better choices.

Conclusion

It’s time to end the myth that ADHD is linked to substance use. It is a solid, confirmed fact. Because of this, working to know the facts, understand the triggers and find the best treatment puts you or the person with ADHD in your life in a good situation. Following this plan puts success within your reach. Grab it.