

Drug Addiction and Mental Health Disorders: The Significance of Early Detection and Intervention

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ABSTRACT

Drug addiction and mental health disorders are closely intertwined conditions that constitute a major public health challenge globally and in Nigeria. The bidirectional relationship between substance use disorders and mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, and personality disorders contribute significantly to morbidity, mortality, and social dysfunction. Early onset of substance use and delayed recognition of associated mental health disorders often result in chronic illness trajectories, poor treatment outcomes, and increased societal burden.

This manuscript examines the relationship between drug addiction and mental health disorders, highlights the epidemiological and clinical significance of early detection, and discusses evidence-based early intervention strategies. Particular emphasis is placed on the Nigerian context, where stigma, limited mental health resources, and late presentation to care remain major barriers. The paper argues that early detection and timely intervention can improve clinical outcomes, reduce relapse rates, and enhance psychosocial functioning. It concludes with recommendations for strengthening early identification and integrated care within medical and dental education, primary healthcare, and community-based settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Drug addiction, clinically referred to as substance use disorder (SUD), is a chronic, relapsing condition characterized by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequences. Mental health disorders, on the other hand, encompass a wide range of psychological and behavioral conditions that impair emotional regulation, cognition, and functioning. Increasing evidence demonstrates a strong and complex association between drug addiction and mental health disorders, often described as dual diagnosis or co-occurring disorders.

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Globally, substance use disorders account for a substantial proportion of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), while mental health disorders remain among the leading causes of years lived with disability (GBD Collaborators, 2022). In Nigeria, rising rates of substance use—particularly among adolescents and young adults—have heightened concerns about the long-term mental health consequences of drug addiction (UNODC, 2018).

Despite this growing burden, early detection and intervention remain inadequate due to stigma, limited mental health literacy, and weak integration of mental health services into general healthcare.

This manuscript explores the relationship between drug addiction and mental health disorders and emphasizes the critical role of early detection and intervention in improving outcomes. It is particularly relevant for medical and dental educators, clinicians, and trainees, given the increasing need for interdisciplinary approaches to mental health care.

Drug addiction and mental health disorders are linked through a bidirectional and multifactorial relationship. Individuals with pre-existing mental health disorders may use psychoactive substances as a form of self-medication to alleviate distressing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, or psychotic experiences. Conversely, chronic substance use can precipitate or exacerbate mental health disorders through neurobiological, psychological, and social mechanisms. Neurobiologically, psychoactive substances alter neurotransmitter systems involved in mood regulation, cognition, and reward processing, thereby increasing vulnerability to mental illnesses (Volkow et al., 2016). Psychologically, substance use can impair coping skills and emotional regulation, while socially, addiction often leads to disrupted relationships, unemployment, and social isolation—factors known to worsen mental health outcomes.

The coexistence of addiction and mental illness is associated with poorer prognosis, increased relapse rates, higher risk of suicide, and greater utilization of healthcare services (WHO, 2019). These realities underscore the importance of early identification of both conditions.

Epidemiological studies consistently show high rates of comorbidity between substance use disorders and mental health disorders. International data indicate that approximately half of individuals with a substance use disorder will experience a mental health disorder at some point in their lifetime (Kessler et al., 2005). In Nigeria, available evidence—though limited—suggests a similar trend. Studies conducted in psychiatric facilities report high rates of depression, anxiety disorders, and psychotic symptoms among individuals receiving treatment for substance use disorders (Adewuya et al., 2017). Cannabis, alcohol, opioids (including tramadol), and stimulants are commonly implicated substances, particularly among youths.

Adolescents and young adults represent a particularly vulnerable population. Early initiation of substance use during adolescence coincides with critical periods of brain development, increasing susceptibility to long-term cognitive impairment and mental health disorders. Unfortunately, early warning signs are often overlooked or normalized, leading to delayed help-seeking.

Early detection refers to the timely identification of substance use problems and emerging mental health symptoms before they progress to severe or chronic disorders. Early detection is crucial for several reasons. First, early stages of addiction and mental illness are more amenable to intervention. At this stage, individuals may retain insight, social support, and functional capacity, making treatment more effective. Early detection reduces the risk of complications such as academic failure, criminal behavior, infectious diseases, and suicide. Additionally, it lowers long-term healthcare costs by preventing repeated hospitalizations and chronic disability.

In the Nigerian context, early detection is often hampered by poor mental health literacy, cultural beliefs that attribute symptoms to moral or spiritual causes, and fear of stigma. Consequently, many individuals present late, when conditions have become severe and treatment outcomes are less favorable.

Effective early detection requires a multi-level approach. At the individual level, routine screening for substance use and mental health symptoms in primary care, emergency departments, and educational institutions is essential. Simple, validated screening tools such as the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) and brief mental health screening questionnaires can facilitate early identification.

At the community level, awareness campaigns and school-based programmes can help parents, teachers, and peers recognize early warning signs such as behavioral changes, academic decline, social withdrawal, and mood instability. Training healthcare workers—including dental professionals who frequently encounter patients with substance-related oral health problems—to recognize red flags can further strengthen early detection.

Early intervention refers to timely, appropriate responses following early detection. Interventions may include brief counseling, psychoeducation, family involvement, referral to specialist services, or structured psychosocial treatments. Evidence shows

that early intervention reduces the severity and duration of both substance use disorders and associated mental health conditions (McGorry et al., 2018). Psychosocial interventions such as motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and psycho-educational programmes are particularly effective in early stages. Pharmacological treatment may be indicated where clinically appropriate.

Early intervention also plays a critical role in relapse prevention. By addressing both substance use and underlying mental health issues concurrently, integrated interventions improve adherence and long-term recovery outcomes. Curricula should emphasize the recognition of substance use and mental health problems, the principles of integrated care, and the reduction of stigma within healthcare settings.

CONCLUSION

Drug addiction and mental health disorders are deeply interconnected conditions with far-reaching implications for individuals and society. Early detection and intervention are critical in altering disease trajectories, improving outcomes, and reducing the overall burden. In Nigeria, strengthening early identification and integrated intervention strategies within healthcare, educational, and community settings is both a public health imperative and a moral responsibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Routine screening for substance use and mental health disorders should be integrated into primary healthcare services. Medical and dental curricula

should strengthen training on early recognition and management of addiction and mental health disorders. Public awareness campaigns should be intensified to reduce stigma and promote early help-seeking.

Policies supporting integrated mental health and addiction services should be prioritized.

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