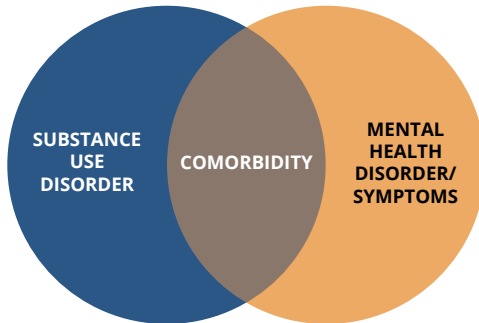


WHAT ARE CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS ('COMORBIDITY')?



'Comorbidity' occurs when a person experiences two or more medical conditions at the same time. There are many different types of comorbidity that people can experience. This factsheet focuses on the type of comorbidity where someone experiences both a substance use disorder (e.g. crystal methamphetamine 'ice' dependence) and a mental health disorder (e.g. anxiety, depression, psychosis) at the same time. Another term used for this is 'co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders'.

To learn more about the mental health problems that can happen when someone is using ice please visit the [mental health effects of ice](#) page.

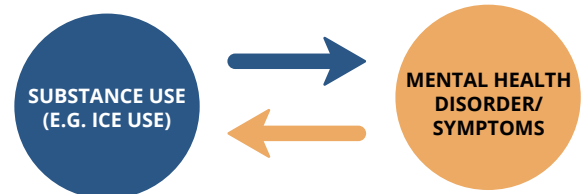
HOW DO THEY DEVELOP?

There are several reasons why substance use and mental health disorders might occur together. The important thing to remember is that, once established, these conditions often interact in ways that maintain one another. This can make it hard for people to recover if they are not able to access treatment for both problems.

ONE CONDITION MAY DIRECTLY CAUSE THE OTHER

Someone may become dependent on alcohol and/or other drugs (like ice) because they use them to help cope with mental health symptoms.

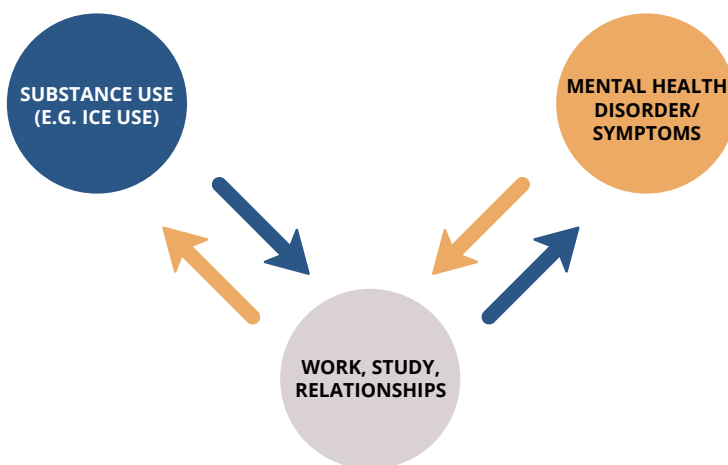
Alternatively, someone's use of alcohol and/or other drugs may impair the way their brain functions, leading to poor mental health.



ONE CONDITION MAY INDIRECTLY CAUSE THE OTHER

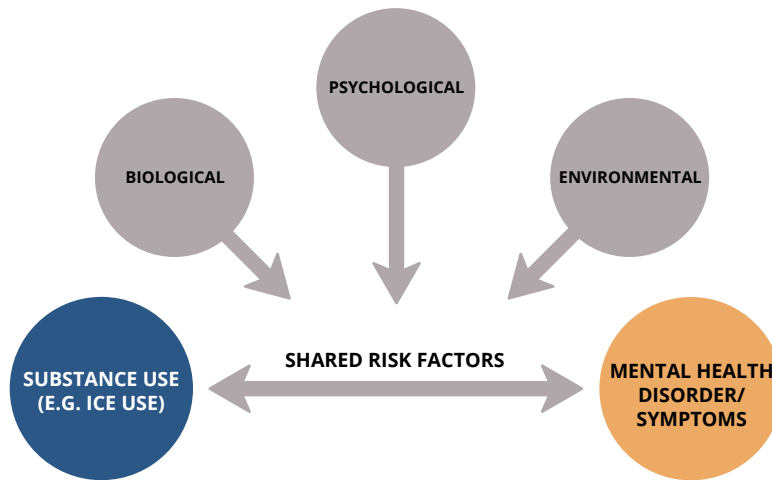
Poor mental health may cause life difficulties that lead someone to use alcohol and/or other drugs. For example, the experience of mental health problems may limit someone's ability to study or work. Someone in this position may start using alcohol or drugs to manage the stress of not being able to study or work how they would like to.

In the opposite direction, using alcohol and/or other drugs may limit someone's ability to study or work. The stress of not being able to study or work how they would like to, may then impair their mental health.



BOTH CONDITIONS MAY BE CAUSED BY SOMETHING ELSE

Sometimes two conditions can be caused by a shared biological, psychological, social or environmental risk factor. A shared risk factor is something about a person or their circumstances that increases their risk of experiencing each of the conditions.



HOW COMMON ARE THEY?

Substance use disorders and mental health disorders are both common in Australia. National population estimates indicate that one in two Australians will develop a substance use, anxiety or mood disorder (e.g. depression) in their lifetime, and one in five meet criteria for a substance use, anxiety or mood disorder annually.

The **co-occurrence** of substance use disorders and mental health disorders is also common.

1 in 3



individuals with a substance use disorder also have at least one co-occurring anxiety or mood disorder.

3 in 4



clients in Australian alcohol and other drug treatment services have at least one co-occurring mental health disorder.

WHAT ARE THE HARMS ASSOCIATED WITH CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS?

People with co-occurring substance use (e.g. ice dependence) and mental health disorders generally experience poorer overall health and wellbeing compared to those who have just one of these conditions. See the figure below for a summary of the harms associated with comorbidity.



Adapted from the Comorbidity Guidelines. See the key source list below for more information.

DO THEY AFFECT TREATMENT?

Research into whether people who have a co-occurring mental health condition respond differently to alcohol and other drug treatment is mixed.

On balance, the evidence indicates that **having co-occurring conditions is not an insurmountable barrier to treating people with alcohol and other drug use disorders, however some clients with co-occurring mental health disorders may require additional treatment.** People experiencing co-occurring substance use and mental health issues should discuss this with their local doctor, alcohol and other drug counsellor or mental health professional to ensure both areas of concern are addressed in treatment.

For more information about treatment and support services available visit the [get help](#) page.



REFERENCES:

Information in this fact sheet has been adapted from the Guidelines on the management of co-occurring alcohol and other drug and mental health conditions in alcohol and other drug treatment settings (2nd edition). The full Guidelines can be accessed [here](#). A full list of references is available [here](#).