

# Talking With Your Adult Patients About Alcohol, Drug, and/or Mental Health Problems

**A Discussion Guide for Primary  
Health Care Providers**



Most people with untreated co-occurring disorders are functionally impaired in school, at work, or within their families and communities. This impaired functioning leads to an overrepresentation in acute and high-cost health, criminal justice, and social welfare settings.

People with co-occurring disorders need help for both mental health and alcohol or drug problems. Failure to address both problems can undermine successful treatment of one or the other. Untreated mental and substance use disorders result in excess morbidity and frustration for patients and families.

Culturally competent identification of alcohol, drug, and/or mental health problems by primary care staff can help people receive targeted referrals and access needed services, which will enhance their physical health as well.

The enclosed card contains a guide for discussion.

## **The Role of the Primary Care Provider**

Health care providers typically think of mental health problems and alcohol and substance use disorders as separate illnesses. Yet in many cases, a person has both (i.e., co-occurring disorders). Moreover, the association of medical problems with co-occurring mental and substance use disorders often results in these individuals being seen in primary care settings.

Because people with co-occurring disorders are everywhere in our communities, every point of entry into the health care system is an opportunity for outreach, education, and connection to needed services. The primary care setting is ideal for identification of people with co-occurring disorders.

Depression and anxiety disorders may present as fatigue, headaches, and pain, whereas substance use disorders are associated with high rates of infections and complicate the management of many chronic illnesses such as hypertension and pain conditions.

## Questions About Mental Health Issues

---

1. Over the past 2 weeks, have you felt down, depressed, or hopeless?
2. Over the past 2 weeks, have you felt little interest or pleasure in doing things?
3. In the past year, have you had significant problems with insomnia, bad dreams, or falling asleep during the day?
4. In the past year, have you had problems with thinking about ending your life or thoughts about suicide?\*
5. In the past year, have you had a hard time paying attention at school, work, or home?
6. Do you have any other worries or emotional concerns that you think would be good to talk about with a professional or someone in your community?

**\*Patients reporting suicidal thinking or thoughts of harming themselves should be evaluated immediately. For more information call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).**

## Questions About Drug and Alcohol Use

---

How many times in the past year have you:

- (for men) had 5 or more drinks (beer, wine, or hard liquor) in a day?
- (for women or anyone over 65) had 4 or more drinks in a day?
- used recreational or prescription drugs to get high?

If the response to **either** of the above questions is **one or more** times, ask the **CAGE** questions below. (Also, please note that the more times per year to either question, the more serious the concerns.)

- A. Have you ever felt you should **C**ut down on your drinking or drug use (use less alcohol or drugs)?
- B. Have people **A**nnoyed (irritated, angered, etc.) you by criticizing your drinking or drug use?
- C. Have you ever felt bad or **G**uilty about drinking or drug use?
- D. Have you ever taken a drink or a drug first thing in the morning (**E**ye-opener) to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover?

**See Resources for patients with "yes" responses.**

## **For Adult Clients Who Need Evaluation**

A positive answer to a mental health question (but negative answers to the drug/alcohol questions) should lead to an assessment by a mental health professional.

A positive response to a drug/alcohol question (but negative answers to the mental health questions) should be addressed if necessary by consultation or referral to a specialist.

Positive answers to both sets of questions should be addressed if necessary by consultation or referral to a specialist in both substance abuse and mental health.

In discussing a positive screen, one might emphasize that identifying a substance use and/or mental disorder is an important step in restoring a person's physical health and helping that person realize his or her full potential.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
Center for Substance Abuse Treatment  
<http://www.samhsa.gov>

## **One Way To Start the Discussion**

You may want to ask your adult patients these questions at least once, ideally during or soon after the patient's first contact, if the medical situation permits, as well as annually.

One way to introduce patients to these questions might be:

***"To help us understand how we can help you, I would like to spend a few minutes asking you some questions that we use with our patients. The questions are about emotional or other stresses that can interfere with your physical health."***

## Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): <http://www.samhsa.gov>

Alcohol, drug, and/or mental health problems treatment referral and information: **SAMHSA's National Helpline–1-800-662-HELP (4357)–24 hours, free and confidential**  
<http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment>

Veterans Administration Treatment Facility information and materials: <http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp?isFlash=1>

*Helping Patients Who Drink Too Much: A Clinician's Guide* and other materials: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/clinical-guides-and-manuals/helping-patients-who-drink-too-much-clinicians-guide>

---

This Discussion Guide was created to accompany the publication Substance Abuse Treatment for Persons With Co-Occurring Disorders, #42 in SAMHSA's Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) series. The TIP series and its affiliated products are available for free from the SAMHSA Store. Call 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727) (English and Español) or visit <http://store.samhsa.gov>

HHS Publication No. 15-4584

Printed 2010

Revised 2011, 2012, and 2015