

# INTRODUCTION

## CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS



**Y**oung adults with mental health challenges also often struggle with substance use disorders and vice versa. Young adulthood is the peak time for alcohol and drug use; additionally, many mental health challenges manifest themselves in late adolescence/ early adulthood. A review of the literature reveals that between one-third and almost one-half of young adults (ages 18-25) with a mental health challenge also have substance use issues.<sup>1</sup> However, co-occurring disorders (COD) – that is, having both a mental health challenge and a substance use issue – despite their prevalence among transition-aged youth, are not well understood or addressed. Many treatment options that have been deemed evidence-based practices often exclude participants with COD from their trials; thus little is known about what works best for this population.

This issue of *Focal Point* examines COD in youth. It was a challenge to compile the series of articles before you for a couple of reasons. First, so little research has been done in this field it was difficult to find information on “what works” best for this population. The complexity of COD poses a dilemma to practitioners,

policy makers, and researchers in determining what best leads to recovery. Additionally, the challenges that are normative for transition-aged youth such as dealing with continued education and/ or finding employment, becoming more independent, and aging out of various support systems (e.g., family, health care) complicate treating COD within this age group.

Second, since stigmatization plays a large role in seeking treatment, it was difficult to find people impacted by COD who were willing to come forward to share their experiences. The young people and family members who contributed their personal stories to this issue, whether under real or pen names, are to be commended for their courage to contribute voices to the struggles that accompany COD.

From the resulting publication, two themes emerge: these young people and their families need both formal and informal support as they strive toward recovery, and better policies are needed to support proper access to care and treatments.

The importance of support is evident in both the types of treatment that have shown promise in effectively treating young people as well as in the stories

from those who have recovered from COD and their family members. An article by Oberweiser that summarizes two promising approaches to treating youth with COD shows that those treatments that are most effective take a team approach – both treatments that include MFT and 12-step programs have shown to increase long-term abstinence in young people with COD. An overview of the Reclaiming Futures program shows that a team approach to working with young people in the juvenile justice system increases services and reduces substance use in those involved in their comprehensive, community-based approach to care. Finally, Nerad and Chin explain how multi-faceted College Recovery Programs provide students with the supports they need to not only remain abstinent from alcohol and drugs, but also thrive in school. Personal stories told by Crossbear, Lofgren, and Rymes reveal how young people and the family members that support them rely on several persons to help them through personal struggles related to COD.

Better policies, which can also be construed as a type of support, are also necessary in order to increase access to promising treatments. Manteuffel explains how the newly implemented Affordable Care Act can help young people with COD get the care they need to begin their road to recovery. Meanwhile, Marino out-

lines how racial and ethnic minorities experience great disparities in treatment for COD and how policies that currently play a role in exacerbating these disparities can possibly be changed to improve them. She concludes that, among other things, more policies and culturally-appropriate programs are needed in order to decrease the differential treatments and access to care that currently are experienced in the United States.

I hope this issue of *Focal Point* increases awareness of the complexities associated with treating COD in transition-aged youth, encourages hope in its stories of recovery, and inspires others to continue to better understand how to best support those affected.

## REFERENCE

1. Sheidow, A. J., McCart, M., Zajac, K., & Davis, M. (2012). Prevalence and impact of substance use among emerging adults with serious mental health conditions. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 35(3), 235-243.

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