

# DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND SCHIZOPHRENIA: A HAZARDOUS ROAD TO TRAVEL

## The Growing Problem – Schizophrenia, Drugs and Alcohol

Mixing drugs or alcohol with an illness like schizophrenia is an alarming new trend. Traveling this risky road has devastating consequences.

Estimates tell us that up to 75% of people with psychiatric illness practice substance abuse. Why? It's partly the result of deinstitutionalization, social pressures, the availability of drugs; and **a lack of information and resources.**

We're just beginning to understand the impact and consequences of this trend. Everyone concerned about schizophrenia needs to be aware of the harm that's being done.

This fact sheet tells:

- **Why people with schizophrenia need to be especially careful to avoid illicit drug use.**
- **What they need to know about how alcohol interacts with their illness and interferes with treatment.**

## HOW SUBSTANCES AFFECT YOU

**MARIJUANA** – Changes your sense of space and time. Affects sleep patterns, nerves, and muscles. Depresses the immune system. Speeds up the heart rate and raises blood pressure. Impairs memory and judgment. Can increase or cause hallucinations, anxiety attacks, psychosis - sometimes from even a single use. May increase depression, suicidal thoughts, or mania. When mixed with alcohol, other drugs or medications – can decrease the effectiveness of medications, - requiring more medication and increasing side effects - increase intoxication and cause impotence. It can take your body up to three months to purge all traces and effects.

### **SEDATIVES (Including Alcohol)**

Affect thinking, mood, and behavior.

Can cause irregular heart rate, depression, anxiety, irritability and insomnia. May increase hallucinations, delusions, and mania. Magnifies the effects of other drugs. In higher doses can cause shock, coma, or death. Slows down brain and body for approximately three days after ingestion. Effects are cumulative.

**INHALANTS** – Permanent damage to the brain, heart, liver and kidneys. Can create visual disturbances and photophobia.

**PSYCHEDELICS** (Including LSD, PCP, Mushrooms) - Impair judgment, memory, ability to control impulses, and distort reality (sometimes leading to accidental death.) Can cause anxiety, paranoia, psychosis, muscle spasms, facial tics and sleep disruptions. Effects last anywhere from eight hours to three days, but after-effects such as flashbacks can occur months or even years later.

**STIMULANTS** (Including Cocaine, Speed, Ritalin) - Can cause headaches, seizures, stroke, heart failure, paranoia, mania, anxiety, sleep disorders, mood and behavior

changes. The "high" is followed by a severe "crash" resulting in depression. Mixing with alcohol, medication, or other drugs can produce unpredictable effects – such as triggering self-mutilating behaviour in individuals who have been physically abused.

**CAUTION: Many common diet pills and cold/flu medications contain stimulants and are in this category. Excess caffeine is also in this category.**

*"What should I do? So what? Why should that concern me?"*

**LET'S ASSUME THAT YOU HAVE SCHIZOPHRENIA OR YOU'RE IN A HIGH RISK GROUP. THAT MAKES YOU ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE TO THE EFFECTS OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL.**

Your hypersensitive system can produce abnormal reactions to common activities like smoking, drinking too much caffeine, and using cold medications. Small amounts of illegal drugs and alcohol can induce or mimic psychosis, or worsen the symptoms of schizophrenia. That may be why people with schizophrenia *are four times more likely to become alcoholics.*

Like most people, you probably won't recognize or acknowledge the first warning signs of addiction. With schizophrenia added to the equation, continued use of drugs and alcohol can have devastating effects. Your mental and physical condition will deteriorate, the illness symptoms will be more severe, and recovery will take longer.

Your behavior may change, even if you temporarily stop using drugs and alcohol. You can suffer depression, be irritable and unmotivated, and overreact to future drug experiences or stress. You'll spend more time in hospitals or crisis programs, you'll be more likely to attempt suicide (10 percent succeed), you'll need more medication, or your treatment won't work because the drugs and alcohol interfere.

You could have problems with the law, which will disrupt your life, your job or schooling, or your therapy program – and the additional strain could isolate you from family and friends.

The substance abuse could also interact with the disease, causing persistent and potentially irreversible changes to your already fragile system.

**Some days can be tough for anyone...**But coping with an illness like schizophrenia takes a lot of courage, energy, and support. Add drugs or alcohol into the mix, and you've got a terrible struggle going on every day.

**NO ONE ELSE CAN DECIDE WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU.**

But if you're like most people, you want to take charge of your own life – and that means being responsible for being informed about the choices you make. The problem is, if you find out about drugs and alcohol by using them, all you'll find out is what thousands of people already know... That they impair your ability to think, and make it impossible to manage your life.

Do I Have a Problem?"

**DO YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE DRINKING TOO MUCH? ARE YOU USING ILLICIT DRUGS? IF YOU'RE READY TO DEAL WITH IT, HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO:**

- **KEEP TRACK OF YOUR DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE**

What are you using and how much? How often? Do you use more each time? How do you feel if you don't use them?

- **KEEP TRACK OF HOW DRUGS AND ALCOHOL AFFECT YOU** – How did you feel and act just before taking them? During the effects? The next week and month? How did others say they affected you? Have you or others noticed any changes in your sleep patterns, eating, social life, personal relationships, your work, school, therapy or hospitalization?

- **IF YOU'RE ALREADY USING ALCOHOL OR DRUGS – WHY?** – Are you trying to avoid your illness or compensate for poor coping skills or lack of emotional support? Do you think drugs will improve your social life? Are you abusing, dependent, or addicted? Do you use drugs when you're alone to find your own "cure"?

- **DON'T CONFUSE STREET DRUGS WITH MEDICATION**

Medication will help you recover. Drugs are a one-way trip to disaster. Find out more about what's happening to you. Make time to read all the information you can get your hands on. Go to education programs or support group meetings in the community. Just listen, you don't have to sign up for treatment or membership unless you want to. Find a trained professional you can talk to. Understand how your medication/therapy works. If you have a problem such as negative side effects, get the medication adjusted or changed to one that may work better for you.

- **IF YOU'RE USING DRUGS AND ALCOHOL – STOP!**

Take time out. Think about what using drugs or alcohol means to you. Learn what your alternatives are. Get the support you need and deserve. You have a tough enough time with your illness. Self-destruction through drug and alcohol use is one heartache you can eliminate.

**IS THE MESSAGE CLEAR? THE CHOICE IS YOURS....**

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**WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA?**

Schizophrenia is an illness that affects a person's thinking, emotions, senses and behavior control. Just as there are different types of cancer, there are many types of schizophrenia. Varying in frequency and severity, symptoms can include: impaired memory or judgement, irrational beliefs (paranoia, feelings of persecution, grandiose ideas), hallucinations, agitation, restlessness, panic attacks, depression, loss of motivation, emotional withdrawal.

To date, there is no known cure for schizophrenia. Current theories focus on biochemical, viral, genetic and nutritional factors. Research has yielded some clues, but as yet, no dramatic breakthroughs.

One third of people who develop schizophrenia recover fully after early diagnosis and treatment. Another third can manage long-term symptoms through medication, therapy, and support – much like diabetics. The remaining third have severe symptoms and minimal chance of recovery. Drugs, alcohol, and stress can make symptoms worse. In some cases, they may even trigger earlier onset of the disease. Schizophrenia costs society an estimated two billion dollars a year in related problems, and its sufferers lose priceless years of productive living. Yet only \$3.95 per person is spent on schizophrenia research, compared with \$100 for cancer and \$3000 for AIDS.

### **WHO GETS SCHIZOPHRENIA?**

**Schizophrenia strikes 1 out of every 100 people worldwide.** If your family has a history of schizophrenia, the risk increases to 1 out of 10. You're most likely to get the disease when you're between 16 and 30 years old. There's little one can do to prevent the illness, but it can be reasonably well controlled and many people recover completely. However, 16 to 30 is also the age when people are most likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol. If you live in British Columbia, that's especially important. A Health Canada study indicates that this age group in B.C. has the highest usage of marijuana and alcohol in the country, and exposure to cocaine is more than twice the national average.

### **HELP AND INFORMATION**

**North Shore Schizophrenia Society:** #205 – 1865 Marine Drive, West Vancouver, BC V7V 1J7 Tel: 604-926-0856, Fax: 604-926-0856

North Shore Schizophrenia Society, through its Family Support Centre, provides support, counselling, information and education for family members with a mentally ill relative. The Centre covers all serious mental illnesses: schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression and anxiety disorders.

**B.C. Schizophrenia Society:** #201, 6011 Westminster Highway, Richmond, B.C. V7C 4V4 Tel: 604-270-7821 Fax: 270-9861

B.C.S.S. provides information, public education, and literature. Shares coping for families trying to meet the special needs of people with schizophrenia. Acts as an advocate and rallies support for people with schizophrenia. Promotes and raises funds for research.

**Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Services:** Office: 604-660-9382 (24 hour line: 1-800-663-1441)

Ministry of Health – Substance abuse information and referrals anywhere in B.C.

**The Information Exchange (TIE), Inc:** 20 Squadron Blvd., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10956 USA, Tel: 914-634-0050 Fax: 914-634-1690

Educational material on substance abuse and mental/emotional problems – for clinicians, parents, and people with a dual disorder.

**Addiction Research Foundation (ARF):** 33 Russell St., Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S1 Call Collect: 416-595-6059. Produces catalogue of books, pamphlets, videos, computer software and other materials on alcohol and drugs.

**Other Sources:** Libraries, A.A., N.A. C.O.D.A., Al-Anon, Nar-anon