Moods, anxiety and substance use: part of life

Feeling depressed or anxious
Part of the essence of being human is experiencing moods (e.g., anxious or depressed) and fluctuations in mood over the course of our lifetime. Much like the weather is both stable and always-shifting, so too, are our emotions. As such, we may feel ‘low,’ ‘blue’ or ‘down’ sometimes or feel grief over a loss, crisis or disappointment. Similarly, we may get anxious before a high-pressure event, a move or entering any setting that makes us feel insecure or self-conscious. We may worry about our health, the well-being of our friends and family members, about paying off our bills. If we never felt sad, anxious or worried in our lives, we wouldn’t be human.

Using substances
We all use substances, many of which affect our mood. Whether we eat something that gives us pleasure (such as chocolate), enjoy a glass of wine to enhance a meal, or take a prescribed medication to control pain from a recent injury, the use of substances is an accepted part of life. Many people can use substances in moderation (whether legal or illegal), without experiencing problems. What we need to remember is that all substances have effects; some have greater risks.

When is it a problem?
The feelings won’t go away
It is neither normal nor healthy to be in a constant state of dread, despair or worthlessness. This is true whether
you’re male or female, or whether you’re a child, teenager or adult. When these depressed feelings, and/or worries and anxieties persist, when they’re interfering with daily life, and/or when they’re out of proportion to any triggering event, there may be an underlying clinical disorder that requires intervention.

Over 30% of people diagnosed with a mood or anxiety disorder have both existing at the same time. The most common symptoms of co-occurring depression and anxiety disorder are distressing thoughts, fatigue, insomnia, difficulties concentrating, and a lack of motivation.

**Potential problems with substances**

Binge drinking on the weekend, over-use of prescription drugs, consuming ‘club drugs’ at a rave, drinking more than five cups of coffee, and smoking cocaine are all potentially problematic forms of substance use. Usually when problems arise from substance use, there are a range of other factors at work. And when depression or anxiety are in the mix, substance use may be a sign of self-medicating.

‘Self-medicating’ is using substances (without physician supervision) to attempt to dull, numb, or distract oneself from negative symptoms, pain and stress. Through substances like alcohol and other drugs, a person may be seeking to alleviate a sense of anxiety, depression, powerlessness, pain or boredom that may pervade their life. They may also be using the substances to try and relieve physical symptoms or side-effects of medications.

Inappropriate use of some prescription medications to address depression or anxiety can lead to substance use problems. Some medications such as benzodiazepines (a class of tranquilizers frequently prescribed for anxiety) can result in physical and mental dependency, and withdrawal can be very difficult.

The interactions between anxiety or depression and substance use are complex. While substances may be used as coping mechanisms by people with mental health problems, the substance use can also worsen or trigger anxiety or depression. For example, alcohol may temporarily relieve feelings of anxiety; however, long-term alcohol misuse and acute alcohol withdrawal can often increase anxiety levels. Depression and anxiety are also associated with long-term use or withdrawal from many substances, including stimulants, club drugs, cannabis, opiates and alcohol.

Another consideration is that there may be a common underlying cause that contributes to both mental health and substance use problems. For instance, people who have experienced ad-verse experiences such as trauma or abuse in childhood are much more likely to experience substance use problems, depression, and/or anxiety.
Warning signs

**major depression**
- you feel sad, down, or flat (not feeling anything) most of the time
- you’ve lost interest in activities that you used to enjoy
- your appetite or weight has changed
- you worry a lot about the past
- you feel hopeless and worthless
- you have thoughts of death or suicide

**anxiety disorder**
- you worry uncontrollably about the future and daily life events
- you experience sudden rushes of intense anxiety/panic out of the blue
- you fear or avoid certain situations, experiences or things
- you have problems with anxiety due to a trauma you faced
- you experience unwanted thoughts and/or compulsive coping responses

**substance use problems**
- you drink/use in response to stress
- you have pain in your stomach
- you drink/use more than you intended
- you find yourself spending more than you ever used to buying alcohol/drugs and/or more than you can afford
- you find yourself increasingly hiding your drinking/substance use from others
- your previous attempts to manage or reduce your substance use have been unsuccessful
- your personality starts to change

**common warning signs**
- you feel tired most of the time or have little energy left to get through the day
- you have trouble concentrating, remembering things or making decisions
- you feel helpless
- your sleep patterns have changed: you either need to sleep a lot or have trouble falling or staying asleep
- you often feel irritable, agitated or argumentative
- your symptoms interfere with daily life

As you can see, mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders have unique symptoms as well as symptoms common to all three conditions. The more information you can give your health care practitioner about the complete range of physical and psychiatric symptoms you feel, the better he or she will be able to identify the primary problem as well as any co-occurring problems.

**three of a kind**
Mood disorders, anxiety disorders and substance use problems have a lot in common: they can each result in negative thoughts and feelings including helplessness, shame and guilt; they can each lead to avoidance behaviours and isolation from social life; and they can each strain personal relationships and coping resources, and interfere with daily functioning.
depression, anxiety, alcohol and other drugs
where do I go from here?

In addition to talking to your family doctor, check out the resources below for help or more information.

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information
Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for our toolkits, fact sheets and personal stories about depression, anxiety, and substance use.

Your Local Crisis Line
Crisis lines aren’t only for people in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have received advanced training in mental health issues and services by the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

BC Alcohol and Drug Information Referral Service
For information on treatment options and resources throughout BC, call 1-800-663-1441 (toll-free in BC) or 604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver).

Mood Disorders Association of BC
Visit www.mdabc.net or call 604-873-0103 for resources and information on mood disorder support groups.

AnxietyBC
Visit www.anxietybc.com or call 604-525-7566 for information and community resources.

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division
Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on mental health or any mental disorder.

HealthLink BC
Call 811 24 hours a day or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you’re worried about, or a pharmacist about medication.

This fact sheet was written by AnxietyBC, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, and the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.