

A Bumpy Road To Recovery: Overcoming Substance Abuse While Homeless

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No population and no identity is a stranger to the consequences of living with substance abuse disorder. Oftentimes, substance abuse disorder can be the bridge that forces people from their home and into homelessness.

A [2016 study](#) on those in primary care who have experienced homelessness, found that half of a sample of the homeless population used alcohol within three months of the study and one third had recently used an illicit drug. The severity of the drug use correlated with a worse health status. In some homeless population samples, substance abuse disorder prevalence exceeds 50 percent of the sample.

However, the three main groups that struggle with both substance abuse disorder and homelessness are women, youth and those belonging to the LGBTQ community.

Homeless women often deal with gender-based trauma, like domestic violence or sexual trauma, which leads to a higher rate of mental illness and abuse of drugs among women compared to men. According to the [Addiction Center](#), one third of homeless women have abused heroin and crack cocaine.

Due to genetics of substance abuse, family abuse, maladaptive coping mechanisms to stress and other factors, youth aged 12 to 17 are at a greater risk of homelessness than adults. Drug

use among homeless young people is higher in comparison to their housed counterparts, according to [a 2010 study](#) on substance abuse among homeless young adults.

A majority of runaway youth reported substance abuse.

Homeless LGBTQ members have the highest amount of illicit drug use and have a 120 percent higher risk of homelessness compared to other populations. An illicit drug refers to highly addictive and illegal substances like heroin, marijuana and meth.

Substance abuse, like many other factors of homelessness, can be both a cause and result of homelessness.

According to the [National Coalition for the Homeless](#), substance abuse disorder can disrupt families and cost individual's their jobs, eventually resulting in homelessness. Additionally, homeless persons often turn to drugs and alcohol to cope with their experiences. Unfortunately, addiction only increases the severity of their problems.

Without a strong social support network or a motivation to stop using substances, recovery can be quite difficult while one is homeless. It can be especially difficult to abstain from drug or alcohol use while living on the streets due to the prevalence of addiction in the homeless population.

When an individual's main goal day in and day out is to survive, ending substance abuse is not a priority and usually not even a thought.

Substance abuse also co-occurs with mental illness, often because the user self-medicates. It is hard to find programs that will help a homeless person with both substance abuse disorder and mental illness.

To heal, those with substance abuse disorder simultaneously need mental health treatment and proper housing.

Substance abuse is often a stereotype referenced to discredit the homeless, but it is essential to understand that addiction is an illness that needs to be treated. Rather than judgement, those who experience substance abuse disorder need an enormous amount of support and encouragement to improve their situation.

Those experiencing addiction will also need services and support before, during and after treatment rather than solely during treatment.