

The last couple of months, I have talked about substance use and mental health disorders, and how individuals can be diagnosed with both types of disorders, known as co-occurring disorders. I shared signs and symptoms, how loved ones can help, and that treatment is key. In addition to getting professional treatment, there are plenty of self-help steps that can be taken. Getting sober is only the beginning. Sustained recovery depends on learning healthier coping strategies and making better decisions when dealing with life's challenges.

Recovery tip 1: Recognize and manage overwhelming stress and emotions

Learn how to manage stress. Drug and alcohol abuse often stems from misguided attempts to manage stress. Stress is an inevitable part of life, so it's important to have healthy coping skills to deal with stress without turning to alcohol or drugs.

Cope with unpleasant feelings. Many people turn to alcohol or drugs to cover up painful memories and emotions such as loneliness, depression, or anxiety. You may feel like doing drugs is the only way to handle unpleasant feelings, but it is important to learn to cope with difficult emotions without falling back into addiction.

Know your triggers and have an action plan. When people have both a mental and substance use disorder, it's especially important to know signs that your illness is flaring up. Common causes include stressful events, big life changes, or unhealthy sleeping or eating patterns. At these times, having a plan in place is essential to preventing a drink or drug relapse. Who will you talk to? What do you need to do to avoid slipping?

Recovery tip 2: Stay connected to others

Make face-to-face connection with friends and family a priority. Positive emotional connection to those around you is the quickest way to calm your nervous system. Try to meet up regularly with people who care about you. If you don't have anyone you feel close to, it's never too late to meet new people and develop meaningful friendships.

Follow doctor's orders. Once you are sober and you feel better, you might think you no longer need medication or treatment. But arbitrarily stopping medication or treatment is a common reason for relapse in people with co-occurring disorders. Always talk with your doctor before making any changes to your medication or treatment routine.

Get therapy or stay involved in a support group. Your chances of staying sober improve if you are participating in a social support group like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous or if you are getting therapy.

Recovery tip 3: Make healthy lifestyle changes

Exercise regularly. Exercise is a natural way to bust stress, relieve anxiety, and improve your mood and outlook. To achieve the maximum benefit, aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on most days.

Practice relaxation techniques. When practiced regularly, relaxation techniques such as mindfulness meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and deep breathing can reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, and increase feelings of relaxation and emotional well-being.

Adopt healthy eating habits. Start the day right with breakfast, and continue with frequent small meals throughout the day. Going too long without eating leads to low blood sugar, which can make you feel more stressed or anxious. Getting enough healthy fats in your diet can help to boost your mood.

Get enough sleep. A lack of sleep can exacerbate stress, anxiety, and depression, so try to get 7 to 9 hours of quality sleep a night.

Recovery tip 4: Make healthy lifestyle changes

To stay alcohol- or drug-free for the long term, you'll need to build a new, meaningful life where substance abuse no longer has a place.

Develop new activities and interests. Find new hobbies, volunteer activities, or work that gives you a sense of meaning and purpose. When you're doing things you find fulfilling, you'll feel better about yourself and substance use will hold less appeal.

Avoid the things that trigger your urge to use. If certain people, places, or activities trigger a craving for drugs or alcohol, try to avoid them. This may mean making major changes to your social life, such as finding new things to do with your old buddies—or even giving up those friends and making new connections.