

GUEST ARTICLE:

Three Reasons People with Mental Illness Turn to Self-Medication

by Jennifer McGregor

Self-medication refers to the act of abusing a substance in order to control the symptoms of an illness. It is often the cause of an addiction, and typically leads to worsened symptoms of the illness. Though people with physical illnesses do self-medicate, it is more common in those with mental illnesses.

But why is it that people with mental illnesses opt to self-medicate rather than receive proper treatment? Here are a few of the reasons people with mental illnesses turn to self-medication.

Mental Healthcare is Not Where It Needs to Be

Though most people do have health insurance, many insurance companies [do not](#) give mental health the same priority as physical health. They may offer limited mental health coverage, they might make acquiring covered treatment impossible, or they may forgo mental healthcare coverage altogether. M

When someone is mentally ill, they often don't have the energy or willpower to fight with the system and get the help they need. It becomes easier to acquire alcohol or drugs to cope with their symptoms rather than scrape money together or spend hours on the phone with their insurance company.

Some people simply cannot afford treatment. They may not be able to afford insurance, or their coverage may be so limited that the treatment is too expensive. This leaves them with little choice beyond finding their own tactics for treating their illness.

There is a Stigma Against Mental Illness

Though mental health has made great strides, the [stigma](#) against mental health still exists. People with mental health problems can be viewed as weak, as liars, or with general discomfort by the public. Mental health disorders are not understood nor are they respected. This can make admitting you have a problem and finding the courage to seek help very difficult. The fear that you will not be believed or that you will be mocked is enough to drive people away from proper treatment.



They are Undiagnosed

For some, self-medication occurs because they are not even aware that they have a mental disorder. For example, someone with social anxiety may believe that they drink at social gatherings just to loosen up and enjoy themselves. In reality, they are treating the symptoms of an anxiety disorder and would be incapable of attending these gatherings without alcohol.

One cannot seek out the treatment they need if they are unaware that they have a problem at all, which relates back to the general lack of knowledge about mental health. We are not taught about mental health disorders, their symptoms, or how to react when you believe you may have a problem. This leads people to remain undiagnosed, and as a result, they unknowingly self-medicate.

Self-medication makes mental health conditions worse and can prevent people from seeking the treatment they need. For some, treatment is not financially feasible while others are caving under the pressure of the social stigma against mental health. What's important for those suffering from mental illness to remember is that [free hotlines](#) are available to guide them. And while there's no substitution for seeking the help of a professional counselor, there are some therapeutic activities that can be very helpful that can be done alone. For example, one could use [meditation](#) and mindfulness or an alternative form of therapy, such as [art therapy](#), to lessen anxiety, de-stress, and begin to tackle some of the mental health issues that are holding them back.

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Jennifer McGregor loves providing reliable health and medical resources. As a pre-med student, she knows how difficult it can be to sift through health info on the web, and wants to change that. She co-created the site [PublicHealthLibrary.org](#) to help spread reputable health information.

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