

Co-Occurring Mental Health, Alcohol and Substance Misuse (Dual Diagnosis) 7-Minute Briefing



1. Introduction

Dual diagnosis in this context means an adult has both mental health problems and issues with alcohol or drug misuse, which can include prescribed or non-prescribed medications. Having both at the same time increases the risk of harm, self-neglect, crisis, exploitation, and accidents.

If services work separately, adults with dual diagnosis can be missed. Good support needs joined-up, trauma-informed, person-centred, and multi-agency work that follows the Care Act.

7. Further Guidance & Support:

- [Coexisting Severe Mental Illness and Substance Misuse: NICE Guideline \(NG58\)](#)
- [Harm Reduction Principles](#)
- [Working definition of trauma-informed practice - GOV.UK](#)
- [Frank – Confidential drug advice](#)
- [Alcoholics Anonymous UK – Peer support for alcohol dependency](#)
- [Welcome to UKNA | UKNA | Narcotics Anonymous in the United Kingdom](#)

6. Actions to Implement

- Screen for substance misuse using [AUDIT Tool – GOV.UK](#) or [DAST-10 Tool – UKAT](#), noting any risks to children
- Explore mental health needs and note any risk to children or other adults
- Use trauma-informed principles: safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment, cultural awareness
- Prioritise harm-reduction strategies (safer drinking/drug use, overdose prevention, needle exchange)
- Liaise with other agencies and informal networks.
- Raise safeguarding concerns promptly under [Section 42 of the Care Act 2014](#), where there is abuse, neglect, or exploitation

5. Safeguarding Considerations

- Increased risk of self-neglect, domestic abuse, exploitation, and accidental harm
- Capacity may fluctuate
- Non-engagement should not delay safeguarding action where risks are present
- Consider the impact on children, dependants, or carers
- Trauma, stigma, and past service experiences can be barriers, adopt a non-judgemental and consistent approach
- Heightened risk of criminal exploitation, such as cuckooing or county lines involvement, where the adult's home or vulnerability is targeted by drug networks



2. Key Points

- Dependence happens when someone cannot stop using substances even though it causes harm.
- People with both mental health and substance use needs may have times when they are stable and times when they are in crisis.
- Mental health symptoms and substance misuse often create a harmful cycle that intensifies both.
- When a parent has issues with both mental health and substance misuse, it puts children at greater risk. Identifying these issues early is essential for safeguarding.
- Under the Care Act 2014, misuse that leads to abuse, neglect, or exploitation may trigger a Section 42 enquiry.
- All safeguarding actions should follow six key principles: Empowerment, Prevention, Proportionality, Protection, Partnership, and Accountability.

3. Key Points

- Look out for missed appointments, inconsistent engagement, disguised compliance, or suddenly stopping contact.
- Watch for hiding alcohol or drug use, changes in daily routine, or becoming socially isolated.
- Neglecting personal care, letting home conditions decline, or not meeting parenting duties can be warning signs.
- Cognitive changes like confusion, memory loss, or trouble concentrating may also appear.
- Physical signs can include tremors, sweating, withdrawal symptoms, or being intoxicated.
- Worsening mental health, such as anxiety, low mood, paranoia, or hallucinations, can also be a sign.
- Be alert for financial exploitation, coercion, domestic abuse, or more risk-taking behaviour.
- Notice if there are more visitors than usual, new friends or associates, or signs that others are using the property, such as in cuckooing, where criminals take over a home for drug dealing.
- Watch for sudden debts, missing belongings, or involvement in county lines or drug running, as these are often linked to exploitation.

4. Early Identification and Planning

It is important to recognise dual diagnosis early, carry out regular risk assessments, and plan together with other agencies in a timely way.