

ADOLESCENTS,  
ALCOHOL, AND  
SERIOUS  
EMOTIONAL  
DISTURBANCES

**A**pproximately 1 out of every 10 children and adolescents ages 9 to 17 has a serious emotional disturbance (SED).<sup>1</sup> In adolescents, SED refers to a range of diagnosable mental, behavioral, and emotional disorders that limits their ability to participate in family, school, and community activities. SED may include conditions such as depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and conduct and eating disorder among others.<sup>2</sup> Adolescents struggling with these disorders face even greater challenges when they use alcohol.<sup>3</sup>

**PREVALENCE OF ALCOHOL USE AMONG YOUTH WITH SED**

- Alcohol is the substance most commonly used by adolescents with SED.<sup>4</sup>
- The findings from several recent studies suggest that adolescents who abuse alcohol and other drugs include a high proportion of individuals with serious mental disorders, many of which existed prior to the substance abuse problem.<sup>5</sup>
- Two research studies found that approximately half of all adolescents admitted to mental health facilities self-reported moderate or heavy drug and alcohol use.<sup>6</sup>
- Another study found the use of alcohol, nicotine, and illicit drugs to be considerably higher among students in classes for the emotionally disturbed than among students in regular education classes.<sup>7</sup>

*Summary of Key Points from SAMHSA's Analytic Series on the Relationship Between Mental Health and Substance Abuse Among Adolescents*<sup>8</sup>

- Adolescents with SED were nearly twice as likely as adolescents with low levels of SED, to have used alcohol in the past month. Among adolescents with SED alcohol use was highest for older adolescents ages 16 to 17 (43 to 44 percent) as compared with 14 percent for younger adolescents ages 12 to 13.
- Adolescents with SED were five times as likely as those with low

levels of SED (2 vs. 10 percent) to report alcohol dependence.

**SPECIALIZED NEEDS OF ADOLESCENTS IN TREATMENT FOR ALCOHOL USE OR DEPENDENCE AND SED**

- Traditional treatment for alcohol abuse or dependence may not be effective in addressing the specific problems associated with a diagnosed SED. Because these two sets of problems are often integrally related and difficult to disentangle, simultaneous treatment of both problems is suggested. Integrated programs that offer individualized behavioral treatment by providers with mental health and substance abuse expertise are generally more beneficial.<sup>9</sup>
- Experts believe youth with SED may also use alcohol in an attempt to treat the symptoms of their illness or reduce the side effects of their medications.<sup>10</sup> Treatment programs addressing both the alcohol problem and the SED must be sensitive to this issue.<sup>11</sup>
- It can be difficult for families and even health care providers to recognize an alcohol problem in an adolescent with SED because symptoms associated with alcohol use may be similar to those caused by SED.<sup>12</sup>
- Pharmacotherapy for adolescents with SED who are also receiving treatment for alcohol abuse or dependence should proceed cautiously. Recent findings suggest



that medications for SED can yield favorable treatment results for young people receiving alcohol treatment.<sup>13</sup>

## **SOME EXAMPLES OF INNOVATIVE TREATMENT PROGRAMS FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH VARYING SED AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROBLEMS<sup>14</sup>**

SAMHSA's Treatment Improvement Protocol entitled, "Treatment of Adolescents with Substance Abuse Disorders," highlights the following programs:

### *School- and Community-Based Intervention Program*

**Matrix Community Services.** This is a school-based alcohol and drug intervention program in Tucson, Arizona. The program consists of three distinct but interconnected components—short-term substance abuse prevention curriculum delivered to middle and high school students; intervention that includes counselors establishing and monitoring peer support groups in schools; and alternative activities such as theater and volunteer work.

### *Clinic Treatment*

**The Door—A Center of Alternatives.** This is a multi-service, patient-centered youth program in New York City with services that include social services, crisis intervention, homeless and runaway counseling, mental health counseling and therapy programs, alcohol and drug treatment, and education and vocational programs. The alcohol and drug treatment is an intensive program consisting of four phases, moving from stabilization to autonomy. Individual therapy allows youth to work through problems relating to anxiety, insecurity, and isolation.

### *Partial Day Treatment*

**The Weekend Center.** A suburban New York City treatment center, the Weekend Center serves adolescents from 14 to 18 years old in an

outpatient clinical setting. The program is designed to allow for flexibility in treatment. For adolescents with limited problems with alcohol or drug use, the Weekend Center offers a 10-week program that focuses on alcohol and drug education. If a problem is more acute and includes SED, the treatment plan may involve individual therapy and a 12-step self-help group. If the adolescent has serious alcohol or drug problems, the program provides an intensive treatment program of three partial days.

### *Day Treatment*

**West Prep Adolescent Treatment Program.** Located in New York City, this program serves young people ages 14 to 18 who are suffering from both a mental illness and alcohol or substance abuse problem. West Prep requires a minimum of a full-year commitment to the day treatment, which includes course work in math and sciences, individual and group counseling, and 12-step meetings. The psychiatrists evaluate the medication needs of each adolescent and prescribe medications when necessary.

### *Short-term Inpatient*

**Manor House at Elmcrest.** In this Portland, Connecticut, program, adolescents treated range from 13 to 22 years of age. Manor House is a comprehensive alcohol and drug treatment program situated within a larger child and adolescent psychiatric hospital. This two-track program—for adolescents 13 to 18 and young adults ages 18 to 22—moves youth through a treatment continuum from short-term residential treatment through day treatment to intensive outpatient treatment over the course of a year. After leaving day treatment, adolescents continue with their therapists in individual, group, and family sessions.

The U.S. Congress established the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program for children and adolescents who are not getting

the help they need. This grant program supports the development of comprehensive, coordinated, community-based, and culturally competent systems of care for children and adolescents with SED and their families. For additional information, contact the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) at 1-800-729-6686 and the Knowledge Exchange Network (KEN) at 1-800-789-2647.

## **SOURCES**

- <sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, "Prevalence of serious emotional disturbance in children and adolescents," Mental Health, United States, 1996, Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Hatfield, A.B., "Dual Diagnosis: Substance Abuse and Mental Illness," National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 1993.
- <sup>5</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Approaches in the Treatment of Adolescents with Emotional and Substance Abuse Problems, Technical Assistance Publication Series Number 1, Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies, The Relationship Between Mental Health and Substance Abuse Among Adolescents, Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (SMA)99-3286, 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Treatment of Adolescents With Substance Abuse Disorders, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIPs) Series 32, Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Approaches in the Treatment of Adolescents with Emotional and Substance Abuse Problems, Technical Assistance Publication Series Number 1, Rockville, MD: Department of Health and Human Services, 1993.

SAMHSA, a public health agency in the Department of Health and Human Services, is the Federal Government's lead agency for improving the quality and availability of substance abuse prevention, addiction treatment, and mental health services in the United States. Further information about SAMHSA is available on the Internet at [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov).