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When substance abuse and mental illness combine

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Regional

When substance abuse and mental illness combine

Substance abuse is a problem for society in general and for many individuals in particular – a problem that far too often ends in tragedy. And social class is not always a predictable indicator of who will be impacted. The fact of the matter is that the abuse of alcohol, drugs and prescription medications is something that affects all types of people. Among the many professionals that deal with issues like these are social workers. Jayme Swanke, an assistant professor in the department of social work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, is one of them.

A native of Peoria, Ill., Swanke obtained her bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in social work from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. While she originally wanted to be a lawyer, a college internship made her decide to change career plans. Before she knew it she got involved in mental health issues, particularly working with people who suffer from substance abuse disorders.

What attracted her most, she said, was the element of recovery and the possibility for some people that they can get better and turn their lives around completely.

"They can make changes in who they spend their time with, how they live their lives, the choices they make, the jobs they have, the places they live or hang out," she said. "To see them make those changes and to be a part of that process really impacted me." Swanke said that the criteria for drug abuse and dependence is the same as for alcohol abuse and dependence.

"For somebody who has a substance use disorder, a lot of times when they recognize that their use is getting out of control they try to rein it in. It may look like, 'I'm going to go out and only have two drinks,' but then they really have five," she said. "They can't control it anymore. It becomes compulsive." Eventually, she added, the compulsive behavior begins



Photo by Anna Limbrick

Professor Jayme Swanke on the SIUE campus.

to impact their relationships with other people, their work, their families and inhibits their ability to do other things.

And different people, she said, respond differently to different substances.

"One person could smoke marijuana

and feel tired and not want to try it again, whereas another could want to use it every day," Swanke said.

An individual's cultural environment is also a factor in how they react to different substances. In Europe, for example, it is not unusual for teenagers to drink wine during family dinners, while in the United States the perception is quite different.

"In Europe, alcohol is often viewed as food," Swanke said. "Here we have a drinking age that is strictly enforced, so naturally people want to do what they can't do. In other countries, there is a lower or no drinking age. Here, the bars are dark and you can't really see what's around you, whereas over there you might go to Oktoberfest in Germany where it's family-oriented and nobody is really that drunk, compared to here. Drugs and alcohol are abused more here because of the puritanical approach to them." Swanke also studies the abuse of "harder" drugs, and just recently published an article on methamphetamine users.

"I found that people who reported methamphetamine use and serious psychological distress were more likely to be unemployed than anyone else," Swanke said. Many of these abusers also suffer from serious mental illness. This fact raises the issue of how to help people who are suffering from both mental health and substance abuse problems.

"Mental health services don't want to touch people who are under the influence or who are in active addiction," Swanke said, "and substance abuse treatment centers are not typically staffed to deal with people with severe mental illnesses. They tend to fall through the cracks. My study showed that, in fact, these are the people who need the most help."

Another factor that complicates the understanding of the issue of substance abuse is that the definition is different depending upon who uses it. The medical

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establishment uses different definitions than the legal and law enforcement communities. Media also oftentimes describe substance abuse with its own lingo.

"We no longer have an abuse and dependence definition, and we are moving towards a spectrum diagnosis of mild, moderate and severe," Swanke explained. "No one is really sure how that will impact with insurance, and the Affordable Healthcare Act is coming out, but we're not sure how that will impact practice. There are a lot of things that are going to impact substance abuse, including the stigma that comes along with it and how the public understands substance use and addiction, and the term 'addict.' Addict isn't a term I use. I see it as more of a label. There really is no one definition." Social media has brought about another issue Swanke has studied, the so-called cyber-mothers and autism.

"Cyber-mothers are mothers who have blogged about raising children with an autism-spectrum disorder, and my work is about why they blogged about experiences of raising their children," she said. "We used an 18-month study and found that the mothers got a lot of social support in this virtual network. They really empowered one another. They talked about how the virtual space becomes an extension of their homes and group therapy sessions. They vent about the social stigma that their children go through daily, dealing with school professionals, therapists and others."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.