

Substance Abuse in Pakistan: A Psychological Dilemma

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In Pakistan, substance abuse, also referred to as drug or alcohol addiction, is a major problem. It is a serious health concern that is still spreading to Pakistan and other countries. The detrimental or dangerous use of psychoactive substances, such as alcohol, illegal drugs, and prescription pharmaceuticals, is referred to as substance abuse. Many medical, psychological, and social disorders, such as addiction, impaired judgement, health issues, marital problems, and legal problems can result from substance abuse. Cannabis, marijuana, heroin, hallucinogens, ecstasy, and methamphetamine are among the most frequently consumed addictive drugs. However, heroin, an illegal substance, is becoming increasingly prevalent over the world, including Pakistan.¹

Since the 1990s, there has been a "youth bulge" in Pakistan. According to the latest figures, over 64% of the population is under 30 years old, with those between the ages of 15 and 29 making up 29% of this group. Youth can contribute significantly to the human resource that is desperately required, given their large number and representation. But if neglected, they have the potential to become a severe demographic challenge to the nation.²

Unfortunately, of the about seven million individuals in Pakistan who not only abuse drugs but are classified as addicts, around two million are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, and the great majority of them are enrolled in colleges and universities.³ Some risk factors for drug usage include low self-esteem, difficulty building goals, lack of insight into one's future and job, little monitoring and supervision when access to illegal drugs is readily available, and detachment from religious and familial values. These at-risk youths have a higher propensity to fall to drug culture and peer pressure.⁴ The increasing rate of drug abuse

among teens and the professional and educated segment of society, is a grave concern that necessitates quick preventive action from policymakers.⁵

Of the total seven million individuals taking drugs regularly in Pakistan, 78% are males and 22% are females. Among these, four million consume cannabis, while 2.7 million consume opiates. In Pakistan, complications from drug overdose claim the lives of roughly 700 individuals every day, or 250,000 people annually.⁶ It has been reported that overdosing on recreational drugs has become more common than automobile crashes as the cause of accidental deaths, with opioids killing more people than cocaine and heroin combined.⁷ According to the World Drug Report 2022, 284 million people utilised drugs worldwide in 2020. After Afghanistan and Morocco, Pakistan was the third-largest cannabis source. Amphetamine use is on the rise, according to the survey, while cannabis is still the most commonly used drug worldwide. According to the survey, 11.2 million individuals used injection pharmaceuticals globally during the study period. About 1.4 million of them had HIV, 1.2 million had hepatitis C, and about half of them had both conditions.⁸

Methamphetamine, often known as crystal meth, is a relatively new narcotic to the drug cartels and abusers in Pakistan. When taken in small to moderate quantities, it can improve mood, boost alertness, focus, and energy in tired people, decrease hunger, and aid in weight reduction. When used in relatively large dosages, it can cause brain haemorrhage, skeletal muscle deterioration, psychosis, and convulsions. Prolonged high-dose use can cause stimulant psychosis (including paranoia, hallucinations, delirium, and delusions), violent conduct, and erratic and sudden mood swings.⁹

It is unknown how many Pakistanis are meth addicts. The most recent major report on drug use in Pakistan was released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The estimate put the number of drug addicts in Pakistan at about 7 million, or roughly 6% of the country's total population. Around 11% of people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the nation's most drug-abusing province, abuse illegal narcotics. Most likely, the real figures are substantially higher. Drug misuse is frowned upon in Pakistan, a country with a sizable Muslim population that is deeply devout and traditional, and many people choose not to seek addiction treatment.

Addiction experts are concerned about the recent rise in meth using among younger population, especially in universities. The availability of crystal meth is relatively high in colleges and universities, the reason most of the patients in rehabilitation are young adults. According to data, meth usage is common among both sexes. However, in Pakistan's more traditional communities, it is more difficult for women to get treatment for drug usage. For this reason, more attention towards the youth should be provided by the policymakers as it is concerning for the future of this state.

Mental health disorders and drug abuse are connected problems that frequently coexist and can have significant impacts on people's lives, families, and communities. Substance abuse and mental health disorders lead to what is known as dual diagnosis or co-occurring disorders. People with mental health disorders may turn to substances as a way to self-medicate or cope with their symptoms, while substance abuse can exacerbate or trigger mental health issues. This intricate interaction can exacerbate consequences for those who are impacted and start a vicious cycle of dependency. Substance addiction and mental health issues are influenced by a number of risk factors, including genetic predisposition, environmental variables, stress, trauma, and socioeconomic status. Among the main risk factors for these illnesses include early substance use exposure, childhood trauma, a family history of mental illness, and social isolation.¹⁰ Chronic substance abuse can lead to organ damage, increased risk of infectious diseases, overdose, and death.¹¹ On the other hand, mental health disorders can impair cognitive function, disrupt daily functioning, and increase the risk of self-harm and

suicide.¹² It is pertinent to mention that most of the global population live in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs), which have historically received a small fraction of global resources for mental health.¹³

Stigma and discrimination surrounding substance abuse and mental health can act as barriers to seeking help and accessing treatment.¹⁴ In order to build welcoming and inclusive communities where people feel empowered to ask for help without fear of prejudice or condemnation, it is imperative that efforts be made to lessen stigma, raise awareness, and foster understanding of these concerns.

By addressing substance abuse and mental health in an integrated and holistic manner, healthcare systems, policymakers, and communities can work together to support prevention, early intervention, treatment, and recovery efforts, ultimately improving the health and well-being of individuals and community.

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