

DRUG MISUSE IN PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITY PRESENTING TO A DRUG ABUSE TREATMENT CENTER

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine the characteristics of people with Learning Disabilities (LD) who misuse drugs.

Design: Descriptive study.

Place and Duration of study: Drug Abuse Treatment Centre, Department of Psychiatry, Lady Reading hospital, Peshawar from July 2012 to October 2013.

Subjects and Methods: A total of 51 patients were identified with Learning Disabilities who misuse drugs and their age, sex, marital status, employment status, place of drug abuse, living status and co morbid psychiatric problems were determined. Patient with psychotic symptoms and physical health problems were excluded.

Results: The mean age of the sample was 29.18 ± 7.12 years. Out of 51 patients, majority of the patients were borderline or mild LD ($n=11$, 21.5%) while 40(78.5%) had moderate LD. Forty three(87%) patients were unmarried. thirty six(70.5%) of these were having had co morbid anxiety and depression. Primary drug of abuse for majority ($n=45$, 91%) was heroin. Thirty (58%) reported to misuse substance with their non LD peers.

Conclusion: People with Learning Disabilities who misuse drugs are usually Mild LD, males, unemployed, live alone and have co morbid psychiatric problems. Early identification and support systems could be the mainstay of management for people with LD who misuse drugs.

Key word: Learning Disability (LD), Weschler Adult Inteligence Scale (WAIS), Drug abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Classification systems universally agree that three core criterion should be employed in making a diagnosis of Learning Disability. It includes significant impairment of intellectual functioning, significant impairment of social functioning, and age of onset before eighteen years. Substance abuse in people with Learning Disability puts significant economic burden not only on the person and their carers but also on the community¹.

Dual diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder and substance abuse have been correlated with higher levels of aggression and offending behavior¹, higher levels of psychiatric hospital admissions² and poorer compliance with treatment regimes. Same goes for people with Learning Disability.

Due to increase of substance abuse in both the general and psychiatric populations, there is also a growing trend for people with learning disabilities to misuse such

substances^{3,4}. However, there remains variation in the reported prevalence rates of substance misuse in people with learning disabilities^{4,5}.

People with learning disabilities who are living alone or with friends and less supervised, have greater opportunities to access alcohol and other substances with their peers^{6,7}. Also more people with learning disabilities take part in a range of activities which further provide the person with greater prospects to abuse such substances.

People with learning disability may also see alcohol and illicit drugs as a method of socializing with one's non-disabled peer group^{3,7}. This process may compensate for the isolation; lack of social skills; lack of support; lack of friendships; lack of relationships; and frustrations, frequently described by people with learning disabilities^{4,5,8,9}.

Keeping this background in consideration, the aim of our study was to determine the characteristics of people with Learning Disabilities who misuse drugs.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

This descriptive study was conducted at Drug Abuse Treatment Centre, Department of Psychiatry, Lady Reading Hospital, Peshawar from July 2012 to October 2013. All the people with LD and substance abuse problems over the age of 18 years were included while people with psychotic symptoms and physical health problems were excluded from this study. ICD - 10 criteria was used

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for the diagnosis of Learning Disabilities and they were sub classified as borderline, mild, moderate, severe and profound on the basis of IQ assessment with the help of Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS). In this study retrospective case note analysis was used to gather information about characteristics of the selected patient group. Their characteristics were studied including their age, sex, employment status, co morbid psychiatric and physical health problems, family history of drug abuse, marital status, primary drug of abuse, and the company they used to abuse various substances.

RESULTS

Out of 51 patients studied, 11 (21.5%) were Borderline LD while 40(78.5%) had moderate LD. In this total of 51 participants, 47(92%) were male and 4 were females. The range of age of the sample was from 19 to 42 years and mean age was 29.18 ± 7.127 years. Majority of these (n=32) were in the age group of 21-30 years (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of different age groups with LD and substance abuse

Age Group	Number (n)
Under 20 years	5
21 - 30 years	32
31 - 40 years	10
Above 40 years	4

Figure 1: Percentage of LD patients with drug abuse with and without psychiatric problems.

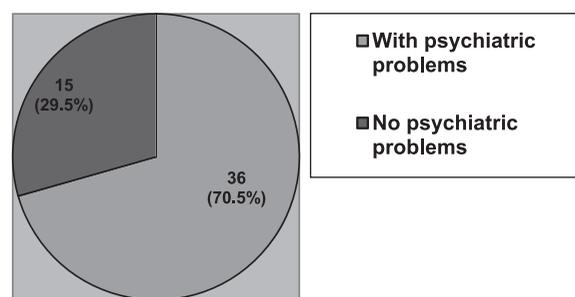
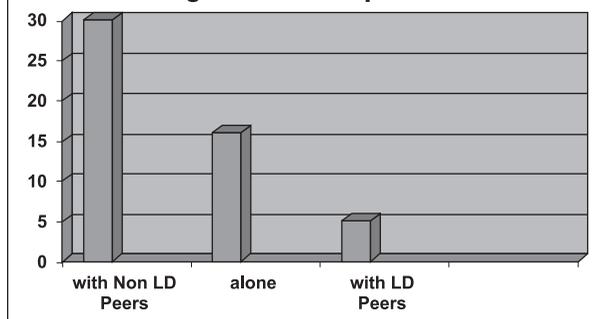


Figure 2: showing distribution of participants according to their abuse pattern.



Among these 51 patients, 43(87%) were unmarried whereas 6(12%) were married and 2(1%) divorced. Primary drug of abuse for 45(91%) patients was heroin while 5 had cannabis abuse with only one having alcohol misuse. It was also found that 36(70.5%) of these patients had co morbid anxiety and depression (Figure 1).

Thirty two(63%) of these patients had positive family history for drug abuse. Thirty nine (76%) patients were living alone, 9(18%) with their family and 3(6%) with their friends. It is important to note that among these patients, 45(89%) were unemployed while 6 (11%) were involved in part time paid job. It is also worth mentioning that 30 (58%) people reported to misuse substance with their non LD peers, 16(32%) people use d substances alone while 5(10%) were using them with LD peers (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

Our study identified 51 people with learning disabilities who were misusing substances and they were found to have a borderline or mild learning disability. This replicates findings reported in previous studies^{4,10,11}. Of the 51 participants, 62.7% were found to fall between the ages of 21 - 30 years and another 20% fell between the ages of 31 - 40 years. Percentage of 21-30 year age group was lower in previous studies but almost similar findings for age group 31-40. Most of the people in this study were males which is consistent with previous findings⁹.

More than 3/4th of the patients were living alone which is consistent with studies which reported that persons living with low levels of supervision were more likely to have access to a range of substances^{11,12}. Alongside a diagnosis of learning disability, this study indicated a diagnosis of mental health problems in around 70 percent of these patients. These findings support previous studies that examined this 'triple diagnosis' of learning disability, substance misuse problem and mental health problem¹²⁻¹⁵. It is not clear, whether the participants' mental health problem leads to substance abuse or substance abuse problem leads to a mental health problem and so requires further scrutiny.

In our study heroin was the main substance abused by most of the participants while a small number of participants also reported misusing cannabis. This is in contrast to previous studies which found alcohol to be main substance of misuse and reasons could be social and religious status and availability of alcohol in our set up.

Illicit substances have been reportedly used 'alone', with 'non-disabled peers', with 'learning-disabled peers' but majority of LD report of abusing substances with non LD peers¹⁶.

Our study looked at people who presented to addiction services and did not include patients presenting to outpatient department or living in community not seeking help. Future studies should utilize a broader sample of people with learning disabilities who use both learning

disability and general psychiatry and / or addiction services.

CONCLUSION

People with Learning Disabilities who misuse drugs are usually Mild LD, males, unemployed, live alone and have co morbid psychiatric problems. There is lack of evidence based treatment for people with Learning Disabilities who misuse drugs and preventive measures should be the mainstay for management in this population. Early identification, education and enhanced support systems could be helpful in this regard.

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