

Information Sheet*
Employment Supports for Clients with
Co-Occurring Mental Illness and Substance Abuse

The Myths	The Facts
Work is too stressful for clients with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse.	As with other members of our society, work improves self-esteem, adds a sense of purpose, and contributes towards recovery in positive ways for many people with dual disorders.
Clients with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse benefit from extensive pre-vocational assessments and work readiness programs before further employment options are pursued.	The best predictors of work success for persons with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse are a client's: 1) expressed interest in working, and 2) previous employment history. Substance abuse is not a consistent predictor of work success or failure.
Clients with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse are more successful in sheltered vocational programs where they can be monitored and have their problems addressed by program staff.	With appropriate supports when needed, clients report greater job satisfaction and success in competitive employment of their own choosing.
Clients with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse will do poorly no matter what.	The majority of clients with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse will get into recovery when offered high-quality integrated dual diagnosis treatment.
Clients who are able to recover from a substance use disorder are always at significant risk for relapse.	Relapse of a substance use disorder is always a possibility, but employment may protect clients from relapse. Employment is associated with continued recovery, and relapse is associated with unemployment, housing instability, and loss of social supports.
Clients with substance abuse problems don't want to work.	Like other people, many clients with substance abuse are interested in working and find work to be a good reason to cut back or stop their substance abuse.
Clients who abuse substances lack good work skills.	Many clients with substance abuse have a variety of interests, employment histories, and job skills that are valuable on the job.
Whenever a urine drug screen is positive, the client has been using recently.	Different drugs stay in the body for different periods of time. Additionally, substances can build up in the body if used regularly. --Alcohol is usually excreted at the speed of about 1 hour for each drink. --Cocaine is excreted pretty rapidly - usually within a day. --Cannabis is excreted more slowly because THC, the active form of the substance, is stored in body fat and slowly excreted. Regular, heavy cannabis users can have positive urines for 6 weeks after becoming abstinent. Depending on amount and regularity of cannabis use, users can have positive urines for as brief as a few hours to 6 weeks.
A positive drug screen indicates recent use and a negative screen indicates non-use.	The truth is more complicated. Different drugs stay in the body and appear in the urine for different time intervals. Some tests include only a few drugs and omit all others. Some tests are much more accurate (and expensive) than others. Talk to someone at your local laboratory to understand the limits of testing.
Clients who relapse with substance abuse are poor candidates for supported employment.	For many clients with substance abuse, relapse is part of the long-term course of recovery. Rates of employment for clients with dual disorders are similar to the rates for clients with a single disorder of mental illness. Supported employment may be part of a client's recovery process.

*Prepared by the Dartmouth Evidence-Based Practices Center