

Screening Questions for Drug Use Problems

A federal government study found that 8 percent of the American population, 12 years of age and older, used an illegal drug in the past month or used a prescription drug to get high (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Slightly more than half of those drug users used only marijuana. The lifetime prevalence of drug abuse or dependence has been found to be slightly over 10 percent (National Comorbidity Survey; R. C. Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, & Walters, 2005).

Three methods are used to screen for drug use problems. First, the client can be interviewed about the drug use. Second, a questionnaire can be used. Third, the client can be sent for a urine toxicology test to detect the presence of illegal drugs.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

You will want to know about any illegal drugs that your client may be using. This tells you important information about the client's lifestyle and the client's ability to cope effectively with problems.

- *Have you ever used any illegal drugs? When was the last time? What did you use?*
- *Have you ever used any prescription drugs that weren't prescribed to you or used prescription drugs to get high?*
- *How do you find it helpful to use [drug]?*
- *How often do you use [drug]? How much do you use?*
- *When was the last time you did without [drug]? How did that go?*

Observe the client's responses for signs of abuse and addiction and ask further questions as needed:

- *Do you need to take more [drug] over time to get the same high?*
- *Do you feel sick or have withdrawal symptoms if you don't have [the drug]?*
- *Do you sometimes end up taking more of [the drug] than you intended to?*
- *Have you tried to limit your use of [drug]? How did that go?*
- *Have you tried to quit using [drug]? How did that go?*
- *Do you end up using when you could be spending time with [partner, children, family, friends]?*
- *Do you use instead of [hobbies, leisure interests]?*
- *Do you have any medical or emotional problems? How does your drug use affect these problems?*

DRUG ABUSE SCREENING TEST

One questionnaire that is commonly used is the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST), which comes in versions of various lengths. This test is in the public domain and is widely available on the Internet (conduct a search of its name to find it). The 10-item DAST had adequate psychometric properties in a study of severely mentally ill psychiatric outpatients (Cocco & Carey, 1998).

URINE TOXICOLOGY SCREENING

The urine toxicology screen is the gold standard for detection of drug use. The client gives a urine sample and may be observed doing so by a nurse or physician if needed. Commonly, cannabinoids (marijuana and hashish), amphetamines, PCP, cocaine, and opiates can be detected, although the urine toxicology screening panel could test for fewer drugs, depending on the facility. Most illegal drug use is detected only for the past 1 to 3 days, depending on the drug (Laboratory Corporation of America, 2007), but prolonged use of marijuana, benzodiazepines, or PCP can result in positive results (e.g. results indicating that the client used drugs) after a month or more.

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