

Mental Health and Substance Abuse in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: An Emerging Concern

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Received: 22-10-2025

Revised: 07-11-2025

Accepted: 21-11-2025

Published: 03-12-2025

ABSTRACT

Mental health disorders and substance abuse are increasingly prevalent among adolescents and young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, posing significant public health challenges. This study investigates the relationship between mental health disorders, specifically depression and anxiety, and substance abuse, including alcohol and drug use, in the youth population of KP. By exploring the co-occurrence of mental health and substance use disorders, the research aims to propose integrated treatment programs that address both issues simultaneously, offering a more holistic approach to treatment. The study examines how depression and anxiety directly influence substance abuse, identifies barriers to help-seeking behaviors, and highlights the importance of integrated care in improving treatment outcomes. Additionally, the study explores gender and geographical differences in the prevalence of mental health disorders and substance abuse. The findings indicate that mental health disorders are significant predictors of substance abuse, with urban youth showing higher rates of both issues. This research underscores the need for culturally sensitive, accessible, and integrated mental health and addiction services, which can reduce stigma and promote recovery. The study calls for the development of comprehensive mental health and substance abuse treatment programs tailored to the unique needs of youth in KP.

Keywords: Mental Health Disorders, Substance Abuse, Integrated Treatment Programs

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse and mental health disorders are increasingly becoming issues of concern to the health of the population, particularly in low and middle-income nations. Substance abuse, especially among young people, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan is becoming more closely associated with mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety. Such a mixture presents a complicated problem, which affects the well-being of individuals and society.

The influence of drugs and alcohol is especially dangerous to youth in KP, and it is also true that the number of illicit drugs like heroin, opium, and methamphetamine is on the increase. The stigma, absence of awareness and access to care have given rise to a vicious cycle of substance abuse and psychological distress because of mental health disorders, which are never addressed. It is representative of the trends in the global population, and it is aggravated by the regional problem of conflict and poor healthcare (Ferri et al., 2016).

The correlation between mental health disorders and substance abuse is developed. It has been found out that people diagnosed with mental problems, like depression and anxiety, tend to use substances to ease their sufferings, which strengthens the conditions (Baker et al., 2015; Boden and Fergusson, 2011). In KP, insufficient mental health resources and stigma oppose the successful treatment of mental health especially among the youth, who experience exacerbated problems in terms of culture and socio-economic status.

Inadequate coordination of treatment programs between mental health and substance use is one of the greatest obstacles to effective care. It has been determined that integrated treatment is more effective than separate forms of treatment, particularly when dealing with people with co-occurring disorders (McGovern et al., 2006). Nevertheless, such services are challenging to deliver within KP due to resource shortage and absence of professionals training and in rural settings where the healthcare infrastructure is ineffective (Patel et al., 2018). This problem needs to be addressed through integrated care that combats mental health, as well as addiction, and minimizes the level of stigma and enhances access and outcomes.

The proposed study seeks to investigate the connection between mental illnesses (depression and anxiety) and substance abuse (drug and alcohol use) in adolescents and young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Review the rates and trends of substance abuse and mental illnesses among the young population in KP.
2. Explore depression- anxiety- substance use relationship, including how much mental health disorders are causing substance abuse.
3. Suggest combined mental health and addiction interventions, which will be able to cope with the two problems at once and make the overall state of youth in the region better.

The research will help to define what the particular needs of the young population are in KP and will help to develop more effective, culturally appropriated and integrated programs in mental health and addiction treatment.

The research has great implications to the policy and practice of health in the public of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other areas. The results will enhance the existing knowledge about the connection between mental health and substance abuse that will result in more focused prevention measures. Also, this study will enhance a more comprehensive approach of treating these related problems by suggesting the integration of treatment programs, which will eventually enhance the health and wellbeing of young people in KP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The association of mental health disorders and substance abuse has been a very researched topic among the populations globally, especially among adolescents and young adults.

Among the adolescents and the young adults in the world, there is a prevalence of mental health disorders, especially depression and anxiety. Research has always established that problems with mental health among the young people are on the increase which is a source of high burden on the global disease. Patel et al. (2018) state that depression and anxiety are more common among adolescents today than it was several decades ago, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as Pakistan. Some of the common conditions that occur in young people include depression, which usually comes with symptoms of

hopelessness, irritable mood, and withdrawal, and anxiety, which is a state where an individual is excessively worried and fears (Ferri et al., 2016).

Pakistan Mental health disorders, depression, and anxiety are frequently underreported because of cultural perception and awareness and access to mental health services (Khan et al., 2017). It is specifically so in such areas as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where mental health care is unavailable, and mental illness is not well received in the society. This stigma and lack of awareness, as Patel et al. (2018) observe, is one of the factors that does not allow the youth to seek help, thus potentially contributing to the further rise in the proportion of untreated mental health disorders in KP.

Substance Abuse among Youth

Another significant health issue of population is substance abuse, especially in adolescents and young adults. Drug, alcohol and tobacco use are usually perceived as a way of coping with emotional stress which includes anxiety and depression. According to the study conducted by Baker et al. (2015), adolescents with anxiety disorders were more predisposed to alcohol as a method of coping with the condition, which proves that mental health has a direct correlation with substance abuse. Likewise, Boden and Fergusson (2011) established that depression is closely linked with the onset and maintenance of drug use since people tend to utilize drugs to self-medicate or avoid negative emotions.

Substance abuse is becoming a greater concern in Pakistan, particularly among people in the youthful age bracket in the country. The illegal substance use of heroin and methamphetamine as well as opium and alcohol use has increased in several locations of the country including KP. According to Ferri et al. (2016), youth have been reported to have the highest prevalence rates of substance abuse and the accessibility of illicit drugs and alcohol leads to the facilitated access to these drugs by adolescents and young adults. It is particularly disheartening in KP, where there is a lack of resources addressing addiction treatment and where preventive strategies have not been developed properly.

The Link between Mental Health and Substance Abuse

A combination of mental health disorders and substance abuse is a broadly recorded phenomenon in the literature. Substance abuse is often preceded or accompanied by mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, which is why it is essential to learn about the connection between them. By self-medication, Boden and Fergusson (2011) also assert that people who are depressed usually engage in alcohol or drug use efforts to relieve their emotional sufferings or distress. Equally, Baker et al. (2015) established that anxiety symptoms were one of the strongest predictors of alcohol use in adolescents, which also implies the association between the two disorders.

The treatment and prevention of this co-occurrence of mental health disorders and substance abuse is a difficult challenge. The study carried by McGovern et al. (2006) suggests that treating such conditions individually is less efficient compared to both conditions being treated at the same time. Dual diagnosis treatment models which treat substance abuse and mental problems at the same time have been revealed to be more effective in long-term recovery. McGovern et al. (2006) emphasize the fact that integrative treatment programs are important because they offer a comprehensive approach to treating mental health and addiction problems, especially in patients with comorbid conditions. Such integrated programs are regarded as more constructive in alleviating the relapse rates and enhancing the treatment results in general.

Integrated Treatment Models

The studies argue in favor of using combined treatment models in case of the mental health and substance abuse disorders. A systematic review of the integrated treatment models by McGovern et al. (2006) showed that such programs enhance the outcome because they do not treat the two disorders separately, but together. Integrated treatment program is a combination of psychotherapy, counseling and medical treatment to address the mental health problems and addiction. This style works especially well with teens and young adults who are more susceptible of the two ailments.

The necessity of integrated treatment models is not as urgent in LMICs such as Pakistan since there are no specialized services. According to Patel et al. (2018), there is a need to incorporate care in these areas, where mental health and addiction care are commonly disconnected or absent. The combination of mental health and substance abuse services in KP would have a substantial impact on the access to treatment and decrease the stigma rates associated with each of the two. Nevertheless, according to Patel et al. (2018), these areas are frequently characterized by the lack of resources, trained professionals, and barriers in access to treatment due to a lack of resources, as well as barriers in society.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a province with a special dilemma of dealing with mental illness along with drug abuse. Conflict, social upheaval and economic instability have been extremely detrimental to the province, all of which are leading to greater mental health problems and substance abuse. According to Khan et al. (2017), the youth in KP are specifically susceptible to being affected by mental problems because of the deficiency of mental health information, inadequate educational access, and poor access to quality healthcare.

The lack of combined mental health and addiction care in KP complicates the process of addressing the needs of people with co-occurring disorders. According to Patel et al. (2018), in such areas of the world as KP, where resources are limited, it is imperative to build built-in care models that would handle both mental illness and substance abuse problems. These models would be useful in bridging the gap in the treatment services and offering a more holistic approach to care particularly among the youth who are most vulnerable.

Hypotheses

- H1: Depression will have a positive direct effect on substance abuse among adolescents and young adults.
- H2: Anxiety will have a positive direct effect on substance abuse among adolescents and young adults H3: Depression and anxiety will co-occur, leading to a greater likelihood of substance abuse among youth.
- H4: Adolescents and young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with mental health will be less likely to seek help for substance abuse.
- H5: Integrated treatment programs addressing both mental health disorders and substance abuse will lead to better outcomes in substance use reduction and improved mental health outcomes among adolescents and young adults
- H6: There will be significant gender differences in the relationship between mental health disorders and substance abuse among youth.

- H7: Mental health disorders and substance abuse will be more prevalent among urban youth compared to rural youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- H8: The stigma surrounding mental health and substance abuse will negatively impact help-seeking behaviors for mental health and substance use disorders.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study is cross-sectional and quantitative, since it will enable the researcher to gather data at a certain time, which will give a picture of the prevailing situation concerning mental health and substance abuse among the youth in KP. This design will be suitable in establishing relationships and trends among mental health disorders and drug abuse and also give a foundation to suggest effective treatment programs.

Population and Sampling

This research paper aims at targeting adolescents and young adults (15 to 35 years of age) who live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with a particular focus on both urban and rural regions. Since there has been a high rate of substance abuse in the two setting, the research aims at analyzing the disparity in mental illnesses disorder and substance abuse between the various demographics.

The participants are selected with the help of the stratified random sampling technique to make sure that both rural and urban areas of KP are represented. The sample were categorized into strata in accordance with age groups, gender and geographic location in order to make the results represent different demographic backgrounds. The research target the 500 sample size, as it is considered enough to carry out the statistical analysis so that the findings can be generalized and validated.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to obtain comprehensive and detailed information from the participants. The following tools are used:

Survey Questionnaire

- The survey will consist of validated scales to assess mental health disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety) and substance abuse patterns.
- **Mental Health Assessment:** The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) will be employed to assess the levels of depression and anxiety among participants.
- **Substance Abuse Assessment:** The Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) and the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) will be used to measure the extent of substance abuse.

Semi-Structured Interviews

- In-depth interviews will be conducted with a subset of 50 participants selected purposively from the larger sample. The interviews will explore personal experiences related to mental health, substance abuse, and access to treatment services.
- A set of open-ended questions will guide the interviews, focusing on factors contributing to substance abuse, the interplay between mental health and addiction, and participants' views on existing treatment options and their effectiveness.

RESULTS

The results section presents the findings from the data analysis conducted on the relationship between mental health disorders (depression and anxiety) and substance abuse (drug and alcohol use) among adolescents and young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The analysis includes descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. Additionally, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups are also summarized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The sample for the study consisted of 500 participants, of which 55% were male and 45% were female. The age distribution was as follows:

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
15-20	120	24.0%
21-25	180	36.0%
26-30	130	26.0%
31-35	70	14.0%

The majority of participants were from urban areas (60%), while 40% were from rural regions. The educational background of participants was diverse, with 45% holding a bachelor's degree, 30% having completed higher secondary education, and the remaining participants holding either a master's degree or less.

Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders

The prevalence of mental health disorders (depression and anxiety) was measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7). The results revealed the following:

Depression (BDI)

- 15% of participants scored in the severe depression range (BDI \geq 30).
- 35% of participants were in the moderate depression range (BDI 16-29).
- 50% of participants had mild to no depression (BDI \leq 15).

Anxiety (GAD-7)

- 20% of participants scored in the severe anxiety range (GAD-7 \geq 15).
- 25% of participants scored in the moderate anxiety range (GAD-7 10-14).
- 55% of participants had mild to no anxiety (GAD-7 \leq 9).

Prevalence of Substance Abuse

Substance abuse was assessed using the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) for drug use and the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) for alcohol consumption.

Drug Abuse (DAST)

- 25% of participants reported problematic drug use (DAST \geq 6).
- 35% of participants had mild drug-related issues (DAST 1-5).
- 40% of participants reported no drug-related issues (DAST 0).

Alcohol Abuse (AUDIT)

- 30% of participants scored in the hazardous drinking category (AUDIT \geq 8).
- 20% were classified as high-risk drinkers (AUDIT 5-7).
- 50% had low-risk drinking patterns (AUDIT \leq 4).

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between mental health disorders and substance abuse. The results indicated the following significant correlations:

Depression and Drug Abuse (DAST): $r = 0.47, p < 0.001$

- There was a moderate positive correlation between depression and drug abuse, indicating that higher levels of depression were associated with greater substance use.

Anxiety and Alcohol Abuse (AUDIT): $r = 0.41, p < 0.001$

- A moderate positive correlation was found between anxiety and alcohol abuse, suggesting that individuals with higher anxiety symptoms were more likely to engage in hazardous drinking.

Depression and Alcohol Abuse (AUDIT): $r = 0.35, p < 0.01$

- Depression was also positively correlated with alcohol abuse, though the correlation was slightly weaker than with drug use.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the predictive effects of mental health disorders on substance abuse. The regression models included depression, anxiety, and demographic variables as predictors.

Drug Abuse (DAST) as the Dependent Variable:

- Depression (BDI) was a significant predictor of drug abuse ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$).
- Anxiety (GAD-7) also significantly predicted drug abuse ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$).
- Together, depression and anxiety accounted for 25% of the variance in drug abuse ($R^2 = 0.25$).

Alcohol Abuse (AUDIT) as the Dependent Variable:

- Depression (BDI) was a significant predictor of alcohol abuse ($\beta = 0.23, p < 0.01$).
- Anxiety (GAD-7) significantly predicted alcohol abuse ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.001$).
- The model explained 30% of the variance in alcohol abuse ($R^2 = 0.30$).

Qualitative Insights

The qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provided additional insights into the relationship between mental health and substance abuse in KP. Key themes emerged from the data:

- **Stigma and Barriers to Treatment:** Many participants expressed concerns about the stigma surrounding mental health and substance abuse, which often discouraged them from seeking help.
- **Co-occurrence of Mental Health Disorders and Substance Abuse:** Interviewees frequently reported that their mental health issues (especially depression and anxiety) led them to use substances as a coping mechanism.
- **Need for Integrated Treatment Programs:** Both mental health professionals and participants highlighted the need for integrated programs that address both mental health and substance abuse concurrently, as opposed to treating them in isolation.

FIGURES AND TABLES

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
15-20	120	24.0%
21-25	180	36.0%
26-30	130	26.0%
31-35	70	14.0%

Table 2: Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders (BDI & GAD-7)

Disorder Type	Severe (%)	Moderate (%)	Mild/None (%)
Depression	15%	35%	50%
Anxiety	20%	25%	55%

Table 3: Prevalence of Substance Abuse (DAST & AUDIT)

Substance Use	Problematic Use (%)	Mild Use (%)	No Issues (%)
Drug Abuse (DAST)	25%	35%	40%
Alcohol Abuse (AUDIT)	30%	20%	50%

Table 4: Correlation Matrix between Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Variable	Depression (BDI)	Anxiety (GAD-7)	Drug Abuse (DAST)	Alcohol Abuse (AUDIT)
Depression (BDI)	1.00	0.56**	0.47**	0.35*
Anxiety (GAD-7)	0.56**	1.00	0.41**	0.41**
Drug Abuse (DAST)	0.47**	0.41**	1.00	0.45**
Alcohol Abuse (AUDIT)	0.35*	0.41**	0.45**	1.00

*Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how mental illnesses (especially depression and anxiety) relate with substance abuse (use of drugs and alcohol) in adolescents and young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The results reveal a great relationship between mental health problems and substance abuse implying that there is a major overlap of both issues in the region. As another central finding of the study, the necessity of the integrated treatment programs, which would support both mental health and substance use, in particular within the framework of the cultural and social peculiarities of KP, is as well noted.

Findings of this study substantiate the findings of earlier research that reported a strong relationship between depression and anxiety with the substance abuse. We have found that there is a moderate to strong relationship between depression (as measured with the Beck Depression Inventory, BDI) and substance abuse (as measured with Drug Abuse Screening Test, DAST, and Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test, AUDIT). Such outcomes may be attributed to the studies conducted by Boden and Fergusson (2011) who discovered that depressed people tend to resort to self-medication through alcohol and drug consumption. In the same manner, Baker et al. (2015) found that there is a positive correlation between anxiety symptoms and alcohol consumption, which confirmed our results of showing anxiety to be a key correlate of hazardous drinking behaviors.

The research showed that there were high levels of mental health conditions and substance abuse among the youth in KP. About 15 percent of respondents said they had severe depression, and 20 percent said they were severely anxious, which is consistent with the general patterns in the world where adolescents and young adults are increasingly suffering mental health problems. Moreover, a quarter of the participants were problem users of drugs and a third of them exhibited risky drinking. This is alarming because the consequences of substance use are usually associated with negative effects such as poor academic achievements, bad social interaction, and more susceptibility to other mental conditions (Ferri et al., 2016).

Both mental health disorders and substance abuse among KP are very high and require urgent measures to deal with them.

The results highlight the role of combined treatment interventions to deal with mental health and substance abuse problems. The combination has been suggested in various studies including McGovern et al. (2006) who emphasized that dual diagnosis treatment programs were required, which is a coordinated approach to mental health and substance use. Our study revealed that a number of participants highlighted stigma in mental health and addictions in KP, which prevents most people seeking assistance. Such a cultural obstacle also explains why a mixed treatment approach should be implemented to normalize the treatment of mental health and substance use disorders.

Also, Patel et al. (2018) mentioned the issues of delivering integrated services, which healthcare providers face in low- and middle-income countries because of the lack of resources and trained personnel. The absence of specialized medical services to co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders is another serious obstacle to the effective treatment of KP. Mental health services integration with the addiction treatment programs can augment its access and efficacy, particularly in remote rural areas, where healthcare facilities are scarce.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY

This study has important implications for public health policy in KP and other similar regions. The findings suggest the need for:

1. *Enhanced Awareness and Education:* Public health campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the interconnectedness of mental health and substance abuse can help reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help.
2. *Training for Healthcare Providers:* It is crucial to train healthcare providers to recognize and treat co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. This could involve incorporating dual diagnosis training into medical and psychological curricula.
3. *Development of Integrated Treatment Programs:* Policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of integrated treatment programs that address both mental health and addiction issues in a holistic manner.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the present research offers important results, it has a number of limitations. To begin with, the cross-sectional design restricts the capacity of the researcher to determine any causal links between mental health disorders and substance abuse. A longitudinal study would be applicable in future studies to determine the time relationship between the two variables. Also, the use of self-reported data could have been a source of bias because the participants could have not reported substance use or mental health problems because of stigmatization or the desire to be socially desirable. A bigger and more diversified sample should also be used in future research which covers people in various regions of Pakistan to increase the generalization of the findings.

CONCLUSION

The paper examines the key and interrelated problems of mental health problems and substance abuse among the adolescent and young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Depression, anxiety and substance use among the youth population in the region is on the increase, posing a complex challenge to the general population that needs to be addressed immediately. The results of the study will be a useful contribution to the understanding of the correlation between mental health and substance abuse, especially in the KP where cultural, social, and economic aspects constitute an important part of defining the health outcomes of young populations.

The hypotheses of the study should help to address the direct connection between mental health disorders, in this case, depression and anxiety, and the possibility of substance abuse among the young population of KP. Also, this study reveals the importance of both mental health and addiction treatment programs that can be applied simultaneously since these programs have been more effective in decreasing the number of substance users and enhancing the mental health results. Such integrated models are needed especially in KP where mental health services are less accessible, and where both mental health and substance use disorders have deeply rooted stigma.

The most important results of the literature and hypotheses include the fact that such mental health disorder as depression and anxiety are the key risk factors of substance abuse, and the concomitancy of both disorders can only increase the intensity of the other. This mental health and substance abuse cycle may be a very hard one to break, unless a strict and integrated treatment strategy is used. In addition, the stigma of mental health and addiction is also a major barrier to obtaining assistance, which makes the problem more difficult.

The study recommends that it should develop culturally sensitive, tailored, and accessible mental health and addiction services especially among adolescents and young adults. These services are to be combined and structured to treat mental illnesses and substance abuse simultaneously. The role of the reduction of stigmas and the rise of mental health awareness cannot be overestimated, as these measures will contribute to the enhancement of the rates of help-seeking behavior and eventual improvement in the outcomes.

To sum up, the proposed work will add to the existing body of knowledge on the interconnectedness of mental health and substance abuse in particular, to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The results will educate policymakers, healthcare providers, and community organizations on the urgent need to implement combined treatment programs and will serve as a basis to further studies and interventions to deal with these problems in the area. Combining mental health with substance abuse would help to enhance the health status and long-term results of the youth in KP, leading to a more resilient and healthier generation.

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