

# Communication Disorders

When Words Fail Them, Substance Use Fills In



## What is a Communication Disorder?

A **Communication Disorder** is a condition that significantly impairs a person's ability to express themselves, understand others, or use language appropriately in social situations. These difficulties create persistent barriers to forming relationships, processing emotions verbally, and participating in everyday conversations.

## What Does it Look Like?

- > **Difficulty Expressing Emotions**  
They struggle to put feelings into words, so pain and frustration build with no outlet.
- > **Social Withdrawal**  
Conversations feel exhausting or humiliating, so they pull away and isolate.
- > **Misreading Social Cues**  
They miss the unspoken rules of conversation, creating awkward or strained interactions.
- > **Frustration Without Words**  
When they can't express what they need, frustration surfaces as anger or shutdown.

## How Does a Communication Disorder Contribute to Relapse?

When someone can't express what they're feeling or connect meaningfully with others, substances become the fastest way to quiet the isolation and frustration they carry every day.

- 1) **Communication Barriers Create Isolation**  
Substances become the fastest way to relieve the loneliness that comes from not being able to connect.
- 2) **Short-Term Programs Lack Depth**  
Group therapy and 12-step meetings require verbal processing, which takes time to develop.
- 3) **Without Addressing the Deficit, Isolation Returns**  
They leave treatment still unable to express themselves, returning to the loneliness that drives substance use.

### **Prevalence:**

**~40 million** Americans have a communication disorder<sup>1</sup>

### **Co-Occurrence:**

**1.5–1.8x** Increase in substance use risk<sup>2</sup>

### **Relapse Risk:**

**Significantly increased** risk of treatment dropout and relapse<sup>3</sup>

*Sources: <sup>1</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) <sup>2</sup> Morris & Onyegesi, 2025: Treating the Cycle of Social Isolation and Substance Misuse in Young Adults, SAGE Journals <sup>3</sup> Beitchman et al., 1999: Adolescent Substance Use Disorders: 14-Year Follow-Up of Speech/Language-Impaired Children. PubMed*

# Long-Term Treatment for Communication Disorders and Addiction

Communication disorders create a fundamental barrier to treatment: the inability to engage in talk-based therapy. Someone who can't articulate their emotions or follow group conversations won't benefit from a 30-day program that depends on verbal processing from day one.

**Our long-term, progress-based model** provides the time and structure to build communication skills alongside clinical treatment. Clients advance when they demonstrate genuine changes in how they communicate and connect with others.



*"Most treatment programs ask clients to talk about their pain from day one. For someone with a communication disorder, that's like asking them to run a marathon with a broken leg. We build the capacity first, then do the deeper work."*

 **Meghan Bohlman, LPC-S, LCDC, EMDR-Trained**  
Executive Clinical Director, Burning Tree Ranch



## Dual Diagnosis Treatment for Communication Disorders

When a communication disorder goes untreated, substance use becomes the default response to isolation and frustration. Without addressing both conditions, the cycle continues. addiction, the cycle continues.

- **Treating Both Conditions Together**  
Unaddressed communication barriers sustain isolation and use.
- **Building Communication Skills Over Time**  
Recovery demands social skills built through practice.
- **Providing Enough Time for Real Connection**  
Trust and group engagement can't be rushed.

### Dual Diagnosis:

The presence of **both a substance use disorder and a mental health condition** occurring together. Effective treatment for dual-diagnosis addictions must address both aspects simultaneously.



### Have Other Treatment Programs Missed the Deeper Issues?

Burning Tree Ranch is the Nation's only authentic long-term treatment program for chronic relapse. Call us at (866) 287-2877 or visit us online at [www.BurningTree.com](http://www.BurningTree.com).

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