



Intellectual Disabilities

When the Need to Belong Opens the Door to Substance Use

What Are Intellectual Disabilities?

Intellectual disability is a developmental condition marked by significant limitations in cognitive functioning and everyday adaptive skills such as communication, self-care, and decision-making. These limitations affect a person's ability to understand risks, resist social pressure, and fully grasp the consequences of substance use.

What Does It Look Like?

- **Difficulty Communicating Consequences**
They may not fully grasp how substance use affects their health or future.
- **Vulnerability to Peer Influence**
A strong desire to fit in makes them go along with what others are doing.
- **Limited Coping Strategies**
When frustrated, they turn to substances because they lack other ways to cope.
- **Difficulty Communicating Needs**
They struggle to say what's wrong, so the real problem often goes unidentified.

How Do Intellectual Disabilities Contribute to Relapse?

Their cognitive limitations make standard treatment approaches inaccessible, and substances offer the social acceptance and relief they aren't finding elsewhere.

- 1) **Treatment Demands Skills They Struggle With**
Most programs rely on reading, abstract reasoning, and group processing that exceed their capacity.
- 2) **Short-Term Programs Can't Build Adaptive Skills**
New coping strategies and decision-making patterns take significantly longer with cognitive limitations.
- 3) **Without Adapted Treatment, Relapse Is Likely**
If the program doesn't meet them where they are cognitively, they leave without tools to stay sober.

Prevalence:

1–3% of the general population¹

Co-Occurrence:

30–40% of addiction treatment patients also have a mild or borderline intellectual disability²

Relapse Risk:

~2x more likely to develop substance-related problems³

Sources: ¹ *Maulik et al., 2011: WHO Global Estimates: Prevalence of ID in the General Population.* ² *Van Duijvenbode & VanDerNagel, 2019: Systematic Review of SUD in Individuals with Mild to Borderline ID.* ³ *Smith & Book, Anxiety Disorders with Comorbid Substance Use Disorders.*

Long-Term Treatment for Addiction and Chronic Relapse

Standard programs rely on reading, abstract reasoning, and fast-paced group processing that exceed what many individuals with intellectual disabilities can access.

Our **long-term, progress-based model** adapts the pace, simplifies the framework, and reinforces recovery through repetition. Clients advance when they demonstrate genuine understanding, not when a calendar says they're done.



"Families often don't always realize how much their loved one has been masking. They seem to understand, they nod along, but the concepts never take root."

 **Angie Buja, MA, LPC-S**
Family Program Director, Burning Tree Ranch



Dual Diagnosis Treatment for Intellectual Disabilities

When treatment ignores cognitive limitations, the person appears to engage but never absorbs the recovery framework. They leave with the same vulnerability that led to substance use overwhelming.

- **Adapting Treatment to Cognitive Capacity**
Standard methods assume abilities that aren't present.
- **Building Practical Life Skills Over Time**
Coping and decision-making skills require repetition to take hold.
- **Addressing Vulnerability to Exploitation**
Without stronger refusal skills, social pressure leads back to use.

Dual Diagnosis Defined:

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.

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