# Overview: Neurodevelopmental Disorders

ADHD, autism, and related conditions deserve accurate diagnosis—not assumptions about addiction.

## What Are Neurodevelopmental Disorders?

**Neurodevelopmental Disorders** are conditions that emerge during childhood development and affect how the brain processes information, regulates behavior, and manages attention. These are typically lifelong conditions that have gone undiagnosed. The chronic relapser may have spent their entire life with the disorder, and substance use became their way to function, focus, and fit-in.

## What It Looks Like

### Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that interfere with functioning and development. Strongly associated with substance use disorders.

- Chronic difficulty completing tasks and following through
- Impulsive decision-making, including substance use
- Using stimulants to finally focus and feel “normal”

### Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Persistent challenges with social communication and interaction, along with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior and interests.

- Difficulty reading social cues, missing the unspoken context
- Using alcohol to reduce social anxiety and “fit in” at gatherings
- Rigid routines that become disrupted by stress

### Specific Learning Disorders

Difficulties in reading (dyslexia), written expression, or mathematics that are not explained by intellectual ability, creating lifelong patterns of frustration, shame, and compensatory behaviors.

- History of academic struggles despite obvious intelligence
- Using substances to escape the shame and frustration of lifelong learning difficulties
- Developing elaborate strategies to hide reading or writing problems from others

**ADHD Prevalance in SUD:**
**1 in 5** of individuals with SUD have comorbid ADHD[1]

**ADHD Risk:**
**69%** more likely to develop SUD when ADHD is present[2]

**ASD Risk:**
**2x** risk of substance use problems compared to the general population[3]

***Sources:*** *[1] Prevalence of ADHD among SUD Populations: Meta-Analysis (Rohner et al., 2023), PMC. [2] ADHD and Substance Use Disorders in Young Adulthood (Fuller-Thomson et al., 2022), Alcohol and Alcoholism. [3] Increased Risk for Substance Use-Related Problems in ASD: A Population-Based Cohort Study (Butwicka et al., 2017), PMC*

## How Neurodevelopmental Disorders Contribute to Relapse

Neurodevelopmental disorders create lifelong vulnerabilities that standard addiction treatment often fails to address. The person may complete treatment appearing "successful"—but the underlying condition that drove substance use remains untreated.

1) **Strongly Ingrained Patterns of Self-Medication**
   Substance use becomes a normalized part of their life.
2) **Impulsivity Undermines Recovery**
   ADHD in particular involves difficulty with impulse control.
3) **Treatment Programs Miss the Diagnosis**
   Most programs focus only on behavior and motivation.

> *"About one in five patients with substance use disorder has undiagnosed ADHD. In short-term programs, there isn't time to identify or treat it. Long-term treatment allows us to separate substance effects from other underlying conditions."*
>
> **Dr. Leslie Secrest, MD**
> *Medical Director, Burning Tree Ranch*

## How Neurodevelopmental Disorders Are Identified & Diagnosed

- Developmental history going back to childhood
- Assessment during sustained abstinence to separate symptoms from substance effects
- Comprehensive neuropsychological testing when indicated

## Long-Term Treatment for Neurodevelopmental Disorders

Standard addiction treatment may achieve short-term sobriety, but if the underlying ADHD, ASD, or learning disorder remains unaddressed, the drive to self-medicate returns. Burning Tree's **long-term, progress-based model** provides time for accurate diagnosis and integrated treatment.

1) **Time for Comprehensive Assessment**
   Accurate diagnosis requires months of observation in sobriety.
2) **Treating Both Conditions Together**
   Long-term treatment allows for a comprehensive therapeutic approach that addresses the neurodevelopmental symptoms.
3) **Building Skills for a Different Brain**
   Recovery means learning strategies that work with their neurology.

### 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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