

Defining polysubstance use in adolescents: A letter to the editor

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The term polysubstance is routinely used in the addiction and substance use field. The basics of this term is when a client is using more than one substance (alcohol, narcotic, nicotine, opioid etc.). The goal of this letter is to raise awareness of the current inconsistency in our research field. While it is understood that this term can be referring to any number of combinations of substances, there is no set standard on the time frame in which these substances are ingested. Does it mean multiple substances in the body at once, multiple substance used in a specific time frame? If so, what is this time frame? A day, a week, a month, a year? This lack of a standard definition creates difficulty when comparing research in this niche field. Specifically, when speaking about adolescents, knowing what this time frame is can help in clinical situations as well as research situations.

The methodology for this research was a literature review. This literature review consisted of 4 peer-reviewed and published journal articles in different journals. These peer reviewed articles were focusing on adolescents within the past 2 years.

The wide variety of how publications in the field are defining polysubstance use can be quickly seen when reviewing peer reviewed journal articles published within the last 2 years. The first review was on an article written by Oldham et al. (2020). They identified polysubstance use in adolescents ranging from 11-15 years old as being defined as ingesting multiple substances between the years of 2003-2014. This is quite a large period compared to Tan et al. (2020) who identified polysubstance use as using multiple substances simultaneously in their high school population of participants. Yet another article defined polysubstance use in young adults in 11th grade of high school by using multiple

substances within the past 30 days (Lanza et al., 2021). Pearson et al. (2021) also identified polysubstance use as adolescents using multiple substances within the past 30 days. There are huge differences in how these peer reviewed journal articles define polysubstance use in adolescents.

With the field lacking a working stable definition of polysubstance use in adolescence, researchers are unable to compare findings across published works. A universal time frame attached to the term polysubstance use would support stronger research to be made in this field.

Resources

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