Which comes first? Age of onset in comorbid MDD and Alcohol dependence
in a psychiatric setting

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Background

- Both alcohol use disorders (AUDs) and depression are national public health issues as evidenced by their prevalence rates in the general population, 7.06% and 8.46% respectively (Grant et al., 2004), and their debilitating effects on the individual and society.
- AUDs and depression have a high comorbidity rate. Within individuals with depression, 40% have a lifetime diagnosis of an AUD (Lai et al., 2015).
- Although numerous studies have examined comorbidity rates, fewer studies have compared age of onset for these two disorders.
- One study showed in men, depression preceded alcoholism, whereas in women, alcoholism preceded depression (Helzer & Pryzbeck, 1998). Thus, there may be important gender differences in the course of these comorbid disorders.

Objective

- The current study examined the order of onset for comorbid depression and alcohol dependence specifically in a psychiatric population.
- We hypothesized that gender may impact the order of onset.

Methods

- Data was collected from patients attending the Behavioral Health Partial (BHP) Hospital Program.
- The Miniature International Neuropsychiatric Interview (M.I.N.I.; Sheehan et al., 1998) was administered to assess for current Major Depressive Disorder and current alcohol dependence.
- Age of onset was obtained for any diagnoses assigned.
- Of 1266 patients attending the partial hospital with MINI data, 50 had comorbid MDD and alcohol dependence (22 females, 28 males).

Results

- In the total comorbid sample, a paired t-test indicated that age of onset was significantly younger for MDD (M = 17.1) compared to alcohol dependence (M = 22.8), t(49) = -4.62, p < .001.
- 75% of individuals reported that depression preceded alcohol dependence; 18% reported that alcohol dependence preceded depression, and 7% reported the same age of onset. This pattern was the same across genders for both disorders. The results indicate that the age of onset for lifetime depression most often precedes that of alcohol dependence for both males and females. This pattern of comorbidity is not surprising given that this partial hospital setting does not treat primary AUDs. These results highlight the need for integrated treatment, and given that depression more often preceded alcohol dependence in this sample, treatment providers should assess for AUD risk and AUD prevention.

- Total sample:
  - 72% reported that depression preceded alcohol dependence
  - 19% reported that alcohol dependence preceded depression
  - 9% reported the same age of onset

- Females:
  - 81% reported that depression preceded alcohol dependence
  - 5% reported that alcohol dependence preceded depression
  - 14% reported the same age of onset

- Males:
  - 75% reported that depression preceded alcohol dependence
  - 18% reported that alcohol dependence preceded depression
  - 7% reported the same age of onset

Conclusions

- The results indicate that overall the age of onset for lifetime depression most often precedes that of alcohol dependence for both males and females. However, contrary to expectations, there were more males who reported alcohol dependence preceding depression compared to females.
- The findings highlight the importance of examining age of onset from multiple approaches (average age for each disorder vs frequency of each onset order).
- This pattern of comorbidity is not surprising given that this partial hospital setting does not treat primary AUDs. Thus, we might expect the see the opposite pattern of age of onset in a primary substance abuse treatment setting.
- These results highlight the potential need for integrated treatment.
- Given that depression more often preceded alcohol dependence in this psychiatric sample, treatment providers should assess for AUD risk and focus on prevention of AUDs in those with MDD.

