

STONEWATER®

ADOLESCENT RECOVERY CENTER

Neurodivergence & Substance Use in Adolescents

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES



Adolescence is inherently challenging, and for neurodivergent individuals—those with neurological differences such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)—these challenges can be amplified. At Stonewater Adolescent Recovery Center, we recognize the intricate relationship between neurodivergence and substance use, and have built our program to empower these individuals to thrive.



The Link Between Neurodivergence and Substance Use

Research has shown that neurodivergent adolescents are at a higher risk of developing substance use disorders.

Adolescents with ADHD are two to three times more likely to develop substance use disorders compared to their neurotypical peers.

Studies show that 20% of young adults in treatment for substance use disorders exhibit ASD traits.

Several key factors contribute to this increased risk. First, self-medication. Many use substances to manage symptoms such as anxiety, sensory overload, or social difficulties. At the same time, individuals with ADHD may exhibit impulsivity that leads to higher rates of experimental risk taking. Finally, the social isolation caused by difficulty in peer interactions can drive neurodivergent adolescents toward substance use in the hopes of finding a way to belong.

Treating Neurodivergent Adolescents: The Stonewater Approach

At Stonewater, we understand that neurodivergent adolescents have different needs—and gifts. “We do a lot of emotion regulation, really consistent scheduling, and help kids learn sensory regulation,” says Noles. “Teaching kids how to pause and verbalize what’s going on internally, instead of immediately reacting, is crucial.”

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) can be a vital tool in learning how to do just that. Stonewater is a fully DBT-integrated program, with all members trained in DBT skills. This helps adolescents learn mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness.

Stonewater staff members also focus on offering tailored transition support to our neurodivergent clientele. “Kids with autism struggle really badly with transitions, so if you don’t know how to bridge that shift, you get a bad reaction,” Noles explains. “We help them ease into these changes.”

Experiential activities like adventure therapy, music therapy, and equine therapy help provide multiple avenues for engagement and building healthy peer relationships. The clinical team also encourages group discussions where all adolescents can share their experience of the world—and what they need from their peers. “I prefer to do that in a group setting,” Noles explains. “I want kids to be able to articulate how their brain works differently—not just the struggles, but the strengths.”



Case Studies

The results can be transformative. Shauna Johnson, Stonewater Adolescent Recovery Center Nursing Manager, describes how one resident's diagnosis of ADHD changed his entire trajectory.

"Kevin struggled so much before coming to Stonewater. He was a terror. He was the kind of kid that you didn't want your child to be friends with. Very defiant. Blank with boredom.

"After comprehensive assessment, we ended up diagnosing him with ADHD, borderline personality disorder, and persistent depressive disorder, dysthymia. There was a lot that — when he came to us — wasn't diagnosed. Everyone before had just been treating his substance use, and that was the problem. He had never really been diagnosed, and when he came to us he was finally diagnosed with the things that were holding him back.

"Getting clarity around the diagnoses gave Kevin and his entire family some clarity around the path forward. I don't know if they ever would have gotten that if it were not for Stonewater."



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Supporting Your Neurodivergent Adolescent

Parents play a crucial role in every child's recovery. If your child is neurodivergent—or you suspect that they might be—educate yourself about what to expect. Then, focus on encouraging healthy habits. “If I’m staying up late, eating junk food, and running on caffeine, I’m going to react worse to any kind of stress,” Noles explains. “That’s true for everyone, but especially for neurodivergent kids.”

Remember, recovery won’t be perfect; but, through it all your support should be unwavering. “Let your child know it’s okay to struggle,” Noles adds. “Help them build a framework to address those challenges rather than feeling overwhelmed.”

Let us lay the groundwork with structured routines, individualized treatment plans, and a compassionate team. Then, watch your child thrive in lifelong recovery, lived.

For more information, visit www.stonewaterrecovery.com or call (662) 373-2828 to speak with our admissions team.