

Mental Health Matters

March 2022



Mental Health Disorders and Teen Substance Use

When teenagers are struggling with emotional problems, they often turn to alcohol or drug use to help them manage painful or difficult feelings. In this they are not different from adults. But because adolescent brains are still developing, the results of teenage “self-medication” can be more immediately problematic.

In the short term, substance use can help alleviate unwanted mental health symptoms like hopelessness, anxiety, irritability and negative thoughts. But in the longer term it exacerbates them, and often ends in abuse or dependence. Substance use escalates from experimentation to a serious disorder much faster in adolescents than it does in adults, and that progression is more likely to happen in kids with mental health disorders than in other kids.

“The rule of thumb is that almost half of kids with mental health disorders, if they’re not treated, will end up having a substance use disorder,” explains Sarper Taskiran, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Child Mind Institute. A 2016 study of 10,000 adolescents found that two-thirds of those who developed alcohol or substance use disorders had experienced at least one mental health disorder.

Substance use also interferes with treatment for mental health disorders and worsens the long-term prognosis for a teenager struggling with one. How can we help these young people avoid the substance use trap when the deck seems to be stacked against them?

Why are kids with mental health disorders prone to substance use?

Kids who are anxious or depressed may feel more emotionally “even” if they drink or smoke marijuana. For socially anxious kids, it can quiet the anxiety enough to allow them to function in peer groups. And since their friends do it, it’s not stigmatized the way taking medication is.

“Pre-gaming is a lot about anxiety,” notes Jeanette Friedman, MSW, who works with families of adolescents with substance use problems. “The kids are saying ‘Let’s go have some fun before we go to the real party.’ But in fact, most of them feel like they need it to calm down enough so they can walk into a group where they’re going to feel exposed and criticized.”

A teen with anxiety might start by smoking marijuana to calm down before social events, and soon find himself smoking every morning just to get to school. “I’ve had very stressed-out kids say, ‘I get high before I go to school because I’m so anxious when I think about the start of the school day,’ says Ms. Friedman. “‘If I smoke a little weed, I don’t feel so anxious.’”

Full article found at <https://childmind.org/article/mental-health-disorders-and-substance-use/>

Common symptoms of teen depression include:

- Continuous anxious or “empty” mood
- Irritability
- Feelings of helplessness
- Fatigue
- Difficulty sleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Difficulty concentrating
- Body aches and pains

Common anxiety symptoms include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Difficulty relaxing
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Startling easily
- Trembling

Full article found at <https://www.addictioncenter.com/teenage-drug-abuse/co-occurring-disorders/>



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In case of an Emergency:

- **911 For Immediate Support**
- **Ventura County Crisis Team (866) 998-2243 –(24 hours)**

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#ENDTHESTIGMA

Teaching Teens (and yourself) Strategies for Coping with Stress

Raise your hand if you've ever experienced stress. If you don't have your hand raised, we hate to break it to you: no one is immune to stress. Not you, and especially not the teens in your life.

In fact, according to the American Psychological Association, teens reported levels of stress higher than levels reported by adults! If these stress levels aren't concerning enough, consider that 30% of these teens reported being depressed or sad as a result of their stress.

What can caring adults do? We can implement strategies that encourage youth to take better care of themselves so that they are less vulnerable to the negative symptoms of stress (e.g., muscle aches, headaches, worried thoughts, etc.). You might even pick up some new skills yourself.

Set Limits

Believe it or not, young people want and need limits. Developmentally, teens tend to focus on the present with limited ability to consider long-term consequences. For example, a teen may want to stay up late to play a video game without thinking about how tired they will be at school the next day. It's often about the short-term gain—which can lead to longer-term pain.

Work with your teen to create reasonable boundaries together. Consider setting limits around a teen's access to social media and screens (TV, computer, and phone). Be respectful and practice active listening so you really hear what your teen is saying about their concerns and priorities, and collaborate on how to address those issues. Once you come to an agreement, continue to check in and highlight how setting limits positively impacts day-to-day life.

Spend Time with Positive People

Not all social groups are enjoyable. Teens (and adults) can feel immense pressure to look and act a certain way around their peers. It may not seem like it, but who we spend our free time with is a choice.

Help your teen think about the people in their life that make them laugh, feel at ease, and provide caring support. Make a list of these people together and encourage your teen to seek these people out. If your teen is looking for new ways to connect with positive peers you might suggest joining a new club or volunteering with a local organization.

Try Gratitude

We know, trying to practice gratitude seems like an idealistic coping strategy, but it really works. Gratitude is the act of intentionally naming things in your life that you appreciate. Learning to pay attention to the good parts of life can improve quality of life over time.

You can practice gratitude a few different ways, but it's usually great to start right when you wake up, right when you go to bed, or both! Think of two to three things and name them out loud or write them down.

Full article found at <http://familyaware.org/teaching-teens-and-yourself-strategies-for-coping-with-stress/>