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Substances Among the Youth: Shedding Light on Shadows

Plague in the younger generation

We often hear a lot about substance abuse destroying someone's life into their middle age years, but how often are we talking about an even more serious side of this problem of substance abuse? When it comes to our younger generation, according to countless surveys and studies done in recent years, substances like alcohol, tobacco, to name just a couple of many, are ravaging through the younger generations, leading to detrimental impacts on the adults of tomorrow.



Even if you've heard this discussion brought up before, how much are we actually doing about this problem? Cite what you'd like about legislation attempting to combat this problem but the fact rides with the rise in reports of underage use and misuse of substances like these that end up **taking lives** way too soon, **damaging the quality of these young lives**, but also **hurting the lives of those around them**. This newsletter covers this issue, shedding light on the unknowns of the problem, as well as discussing what could be done about it and how to handle it in your own life. This problem has been talked about at minimum for too long, and **it's about time that we talked about it with some seriousness and intent to do something about it**.

Knowing the Problem

This problem of teen substance use and misuse is plaguing more and more of a society that has grown accustomed to leaving problems for the younger generation to solve. This has a trickle down effect to these problems now coming into the younger generation, making it part of our lives as well. Now we

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live in a world where the younger generation faces many looming problems, but few quite so looming inside the generation itself than this problem of substance use and misuse, and the numbers are more eye-opening than you might think.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), by the 8th grade, 15.5% of teens have had at least one drink, and by 12th grade, this number jumps to 62%.¹

According to the FDA, the percentage of high school students using tobacco and e-cigarettes is at around 12.6% and 10% respectively, while middle school student statistics have risen from 4.5% to 6.6% in just one year.²

The Monitoring the Future Study found that marijuana remains the most widely used illicit drug among teens. In 2023, 36% of 12th graders reported using marijuana in the past year.³

I won't hound you with too many statistics but they should open your eyes to how significant of a problem this is. As someone who is into college and went through high school, I can certainly speak

from my experience that these statistics are very real. As disheartening and awful as these statistics might be, it is a problem that needs to be addressed. Let's get to know some basic information about this topic first, and that starts with labels.

When discussing this issue, it is generally talked about as teen substance abuse. However this is a label that is often not accurate to what these solutions are attempting to eradicate. Knowing the difference between substance **use, misuse, and abuse** is very important to being able to handle the problem correctly and important when making claims about the problem. Here are some basic definitions to get familiar with:



Substance use: Simply the use of any substance at all, including alcohol, marijuana, nicotine, cocaine, etc. This is not always harmful or serious when taking into account prescription medication or drugs or even drinking at moderate and safe levels but it is most often referred to the use of substances with negative impacts.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). *Alcohol Facts and Statistics*. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-topics/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>

² Products, C. for T. (2023). *Results from the annual National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS)*. U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

<https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/youth-and-tobacco/results-annual-national-youth-tobacco-survey>

³ Monitoring the future. (2023). <https://monitoringthefuture.org/>

Substance misuse: The use of any substance not for its intended purpose or for negative intentions. This is always a negative, as it refers to anything you would be consuming at a dangerous rate or in a dangerous way. This could include prescription medication being consumed in the wrong way.

Substance abuse: The use of any substance to the extent that it becomes a dependence or addiction. This is the extreme of the problem as it refers to the extent that your life is taken over by this substance and it becomes very difficult to turn things around.⁴

Knowing the definitions of these terms is important when addressing this problem because mislabeling a situation related to substances can lead to **stigmas, miscommunication of a problem, inadequate or extreme interventions, or ineffective laws and policy implications** that cannot solve the problem that it does not understand or address at all.

Where does the shadow come from?

Problems related to substances in teens can come from a variety of problems, often it can be a mix of them that could explain why one individual might take up these practices.

Peer pressure is the most commonly talked about cause of teen substance abuse. Peers that are similar ages, often a little bit older, have immense control over the actions of those around them. When in social settings where these substances are normalized, peer pressure can get to almost any teen as most teens strive on some level to feel accepted, to not feel like an outcast or different from those around them.

Family environment is a place that, under these conditions, would normalize the use of substances from a very early age. We look up to, run back to, and in the end we come from our families at these



⁴ Use, misuse, and abuse. OK I'M READY. (2022, August 8). <https://okimready.org/article/use-misuse-and-abuse/#:~:text=Substance%20abuse%20means%20having%20a,he%20intent%20behind%20their%20usage.>

What can be done about it?

So many causes to this problem may make it feel overwhelming and invoke the thought that it could be too difficult to solve such a problem. I know that in my own life, I've known people who have pushed the boundary of using these substances for fun and recreation and gotten into places that it has become something that has taken parts of their lives from such a young age, I think if you've read this far into the newsletter that it's very possible you know people like this too in your own life. **But what can be done about it? Many things.**



Education and awareness programs are great ways to achieve meaningful change. These are good because it's easy to bring these into high schools and middle schools where this would be a problem. It's not as easy as just talking to students. You could say whatever you want to them but it only matters if they listen. These programs are more about getting them to listen than it is about the information you're giving them.

Prevention programs are similar to education and awareness programs, however they are geared to working with areas prone to these issues exclusively, like those poor socio-economic areas we talked about earlier. These tend to be more effective because they work with more urgency and in areas that require more urgency.

Parental involvement is very influential but only in the right ways. Parental involvement does not mean going to your child, grounding them, yelling at them, scolding them. This leads to a lack of trust and significantly increases the chances of rebellious behavior to act out and continue these practices more. Parental involvement means you can connect with your child emotionally and build trust and support. This often has better chances of success with adults of other roles in the teen's life, like an **aunt, uncle, school counselor or teacher that they look up to**, or a **coach** even. Some sort of adult figure that the child might look up to more than a parent, as many kids who have these problems have some sort of difficulty with one or both parents.⁶

⁶ Berge, J., Sundell, K., Öjehagen, A., & Håkansson, A. (2016, January 14). *Role of parenting styles in adolescent substance use: Results from a Swedish longitudinal cohort study*. BMJ open. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4735309/#:~:text=Children%20of%20authoritarian%20parents%20generally,or%20even%20an%20inverse%20association.>

Creating accessible help services allows for the same effect that the cause of the problem of accessibility but in a positive way. Just like accessibility can encourage bad practices and use of substances, accessible services to help combat the problem encourage teens to seek out help or to stay away from substances entirely. **This calls for a profound need to increase services in poor socio-economic areas where these problems are more prone and often lack accessible help services.**

Regulation and legislation is a more lawful way to go about cracking down on these problems and can certainly be helpful when executed properly. As a citizen, you can contribute to these solutions by looking for representatives in politics who focus on fixing instabilities or problems in society and participating in democracy by casting your vote for who can solve problems like the **mental health crisis, housing crisis, homelessness,** and as simple as **problems in our youth communities** specifically, all of which contribute to this problem as they contribute largely to the poor socio-economic areas.



Early intervention⁷ can be hard to get to effectively because it requires a heightened level of attention and involvement already but this is so crucial in being able to solve a problem at all. The sooner you can catch the problem, the more likely you'll be able to fix it. It is important to not be neglectful of the youth because of many reasons. But in this case, being neglectful will mean you will almost certainly not be able to catch the problem until it has become severe.

Peer support programs are extremely helpful because it allows kids to connect with others their age and feel a sense of belonging and community without resorting to substances to do that. From personal experience, peer support programs are very good at getting to students when prepared properly structured and peers can be properly trained to conduct **support groups** and **1 on 1 meetings.**

⁷ Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2023, February 22). *What parents should know about teen drug abuse.* Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teen-drug-abuse/art-20045921>

Turning the Lights on

Youth substance abuse is an epidemic that is damaging the lives of millions of young lives around the planet. Substances, to any extent, even for fun and recreation, can be harmful to young lives. From a neurological standpoint, the use, misuse, and abuse of these substances interfere with neurological pathways being formed in the brain that don't finish developing and maturing until your 20's.

Every time you indulge in these substances as a teen, your brain doesn't know how to handle them and it sacrifices the development of a part of your brain to worry about dealing with the substances entering your bloodstream and into the brain.

If you're a teenager reading this newsletter, I speak to you personally. **No matter what anyone says or makes you feel about consuming substances, it is harmful.** What I've noticed with many people our age is that they feel like they're grown up and mature. Do you remember being

in the 3rd grade and feeling like the 5th and 6th graders were grown up, mature, the big kids at school? Then you get to 6th grade and you feel like you're the biggest, most mature kids on campus? You were still a kid. You look at 6th graders now and you see very small children. While you're older now, you are still a kid. Even as you approach your 20's, you still are mentally not an adult yet. Your decisions are yours and yours alone and they come with consequences, but be kind to your body and your brain especially, you can't fix it once it's been damaged.

To anyone who knows someone who indulges in these things, your support is helpful for them to stop indulging. They are not your responsibility unless they're your children. But they make their choices. What you can do is to remind them that they have your support to take care of their life and make good choices.

At the end of the day, there are so many people in this world that it makes it impossible to solve every problem for everyone. While this is difficult, it's better to think about it like you're changing the lives of individuals, one after another, and that is **change worth fighting for.**



Further Resource Links:

Mental health disorders and teen substance use. Child Mind Institute. (2023, October 30).

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

Hirsch, L. (Ed.). (2023, August). *Dealing with addiction (for teens) | nemours kidshealth.* KidsHealth.

<https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/addictions.html>

Lyle Murphy Lyle Murphy is the founder of the Alternative to Meds Center. (2022, September 20). *How to help teens overcome substance abuse.* Alternative to Meds.

<https://www.alternativetomed.com/blog/teen-substance-abuse/>