

Chapter 27

Taking Care of Yourself: A Word about Substance Use

We weren't sure if we needed to talk about substance use and abuse with you just yet. So, we talked to many young people and asked them what they thought. *Were they ever under pressure to try smoking, alcohol or other drugs? Did they know anyone who was already using or experimenting with substances? Did they think that it was an important issue to discuss with the rest of their peers?* Although the answers varied, we were told by almost all of those young people that smoking was a big topic. You might not know that smoking is often the beginning of using other substances, so we decided that we should share some thoughts with you on the topic.

What is Substance Use?

Substance use is just that—using a substance. People use substances to alter the way they feel all the time. When is the last time you took cold medicine? How about an aspirin? Maybe you took some antacid for a stomach-ache. When we talk about substance use in this chapter, though, we are talking about using a substance to change the way you feel—but not for medical purposes.

Some of the most commonly used substances in our culture are: tobacco, alcohol, and various kinds of other drugs. Some substances may not seem like drugs at all, like glue, or household aerosols. But when chemicals are used for the purpose of changing the way that you feel, we call this substance use.

What is Substance Abuse?

Substance abuse is the overuse of a substance, which usually turns into habitual, or regular, use. People have different body chemistries and tolerance levels. Some adults can tolerate a glass of wine and not be heavily influenced. Others cannot drink at all or they will become addicted. It's not that those people want to be addicted—it's that they have a different body chemistry and once they start to drink or use other substances, they cannot control their use.

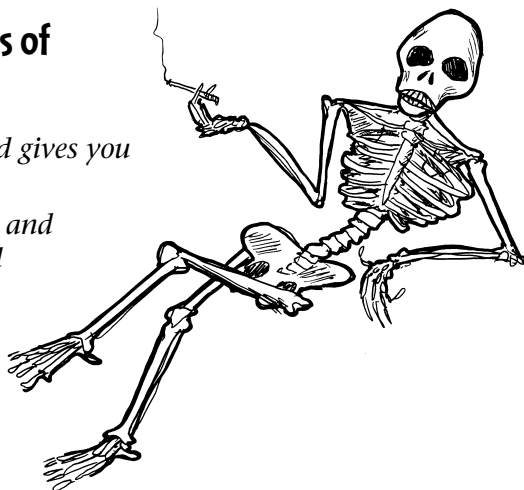
Tobacco is one of the most used and abused substances in our society. The nicotine in tobacco is an incredibly powerful chemical. Most people who try tobacco products, if they use them more than just once or twice, can get hooked. Nicotine is just as addictive as heroin. Research shows that most people who start to use tobacco products regularly get addicted. The longer a person uses a substance, the harder it is for them to get away from it.

What are Some of the Consequences of Smoking, Drinking and Using Marijuana?

Because cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana are the most commonly abused substances in America, we have decided to take a quick look at how using these substances over a long period of time might effect you. *Remember, this is just a preview—like coming attractions at the movies—our lists don't include all of the gory details!* Nonetheless, you can make a more informed decision once you have more information.

Some of the Consequences of Cigarette Smoking

- ⊗ Turns teeth yellow and gives you bad breath.
- ⊗ Prematurely ages skin and causes fingernails and skin to turn yellow or grayish.
- ⊗ More than half of teens say they



won't date someone who smokes.

- ☞ *More likely to use alcohol.*
- ☞ *More likely to smoke marijuana.*
- ☞ *More likely to do other drugs.*
- ☞ *If you start smoking before the age of 18 you are much more likely to become addicted and to continue smoking for the greater part of your life.*
- ☞ *An estimated one-fifth of all deaths are the result of tobacco use (paired with many types of cancer, including lung cancer).*

Some of the Consequences of Abusing Alcohol

- ☞ *Death from car accidents, homicide and suicide.*
- ☞ *Death or coma from over-drinking.*
- ☞ *Alcohol-related diseases, most often resulting from liver damage.*
- ☞ *Impaired decision making, which may result in harming both yourself and others (for example, drinking and driving).*
- ☞ *Inability to maintain a satisfying job.*
- ☞ *Inability to maintain healthy human relationships.*

Some of the Consequences of Smoking Marijuana

- ☞ *Less likely to be capable of making good choices.*
- ☞ *Less likely to learn how to get along with other people.*
- ☞ *More likely to have problems with parents.*
- ☞ *More likely to be a bad role model for younger brothers or sisters.*
- ☞ *Less likely to be able to learn new skills.*

Although substance abuse can hurt you in many ways, perhaps the most serious damage is to your inner self. When you get into the habit of using substances to help you feel happy and excited about life, you will forget how to feel good without them. The high that you feel from using chemicals is *not a real high*! It is fake and you will always feel let down afterwards.

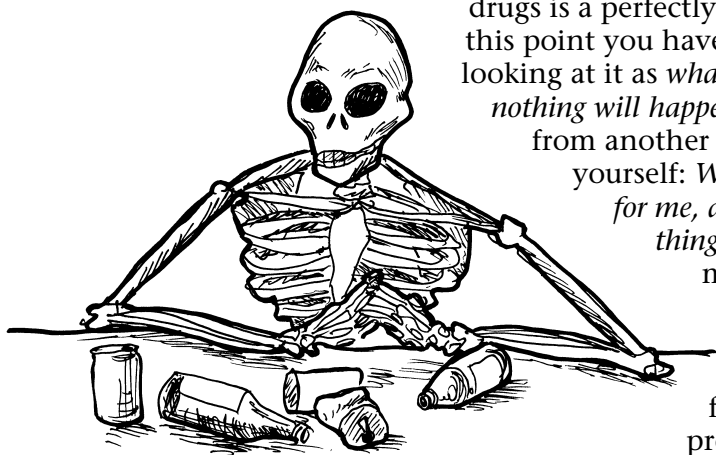
When you use substances because you are sad or under pressure, you are taking a false shortcut. As we have already discussed, life is sometimes hard and sometimes even unfair. By learning

how to handle difficulties in life, without fogging up your mind with chemicals, you become a stronger person. No one in history has ever made great accomplishments by taking the easy way. We are not saying that drugs are the easy way. They are not. We are saying that by using substances to make you feel happy, to cope with stress or to be one of the gang, you are cheating yourself.

Sometimes doing your best means just getting by, and that is okay. Sometimes people go through the most difficult times just before a big breakthrough. If you use substances to help you get through, you may never have that breakthrough. We think that you will be the happiest when you feel good about yourself and about your decisions. To really find out what you are capable of, you have to try, and sometimes trying means losing and getting back up again. No low in life will be forever, and the best highs in life come naturally. By building up your resistance, you can discover what it means to be your best and not get pulled onto the sidelines of life.

What About Just Trying Out Smoking, Drinking or Marijuana?

Wondering about cigarettes and drugs is a perfectly natural curiosity. At this point you have a choice. Instead of looking at it as *what is the probability that nothing will happen to me?*, look at it from another point of view. Ask yourself: *What is the best thing for me, and is this the best thing for me right now?* You



may want to think about how risky it is for you. Are there members of your family who have problems with smoking, drinking or other

drugs? You are under 18, and the younger you are when you start, the more likely you are to develop a problem with addiction. How could getting hooked on a substance influence other areas of your life, like your social life, school and your relationship with your parents or guardians?

How Can You Say No?

It's not usually the outside factors that make it difficult for a person to say *no*. It is usually how the person feels inside that makes it difficult. You might feel that you want to be a part of the group and that if you don't use with people, then you won't feel accepted. Most other teenagers will get the message if you are willing to say you don't want to, and you are clear.

It will be harder if you used to be into drugs and your friends are a group that uses. But if your friends are people who make choices about enjoying doing fun activities and hanging out with each other without substances, you won't face the same problem. Your ability to say *no* may help your friends be tough enough to say *no* also. People respect those who are not always trying to follow the crowd. Think about the positive side of not using substances, and just say *no*.

No Thanks, I'm Not Interested.

- ☞ *No way! Don't be a loser, let's do something else.*
- ☞ *No, I have better things to do.*
- ☞ *Not only is it illegal, but I don't want it.*
- ☞ *No thanks, I don't need to get my kicks from that stuff.*
- ☞ *Nope, see you later.*

For Those Who Have the Disease of Addiction

We know more and more that with using substances whether it be tobacco, marijuana or alcohol that it is a body, mind and soul connection—you can't really separate it. A person who is addicted can't treat alcohol or tobacco like another person. They can't use substances at all. That is because their body is different, just like a diabetic person's body is different. For some kids, their only choice is to get help. They have already started to use and they're at the point where they're not making a choice about avoiding something that could harm them. They are already at a point where it is harming them. It's important to understand that one of the vital things for people who are recovering from a substance addiction is that they are still accountable and responsible for the choices they make.

Knowing How Good You Can Be

Those who have already tried it or are using can make a new choice. You can start to live a life that is more helpful to you than hurtful to you. Part of it is coming back to some basic questions. *What is your place in this world? What star are you reaching for? What positive things are making a difference in your life? And what positive difference do you want to make in this world?*

You are connected. Your decisions are not just about you. Your decisions affect other people as well. If you have younger brothers and sisters, then what you do is an example to them. Younger children are much more likely to use if they see their older brother or sister use. Ask yourself if you are making decisions based on what is healthy for you and for others. It is tremendously important to remember that we are all connected—whether it is your friends or your family. What happens to them affects us and what happens to us affects them.

Talk openly with your friends and family about making decisions concerning substances. Think about what is it that you want out of this life and what is it that you want to give to this world. What is your special gift? Will using substances help you? Basically, like many other big decisions, now it is up to you. You are capable of making healthy decisions if you can think ahead and keep your goals in mind.



Journal

Most people start using substances because they are pushed by someone else to *just try it*. What would you say to someone who tries to push you?



To Do

1. Make a list of your goals—the things you really want to accomplish. How would using substances possibly get in the way of your achieving your goals? If you need a refresher on writing goals, see Chapter Four.
2. As a class, make up situations in which a person is being pressured to use drugs. Practice saying *no* confidently and giving reasons why you don't want to experiment.

Key Points

- ☞ The choice to remain substance-free is one of the biggest decisions you will ever make.
- ☞ There are many consequences of using substances that may not be easy to see immediately.
- ☞ The best way to avoid taking the risks involved in substance use is not to begin using.



Be in charge of your own life, don't let junk into your body. It will just cloud you up and make you forget who you really are.

Anonymous

