

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS & 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.

WHY TEENAGERS GET ADDICTED SOONER

Adolescent alcohol or drug use accelerates very quickly when an untreated mental health disorder is present. “Within months, we can see problematic use,” says Dr. Taskiran. Why are they different than adults? In the adolescent brain, pathways between regions are still developing. This is why teens learn new things quickly. This “plasticity” means the brain easily habituates to drugs and alcohol. “If you start drinking at 30, you don’t get addicted nearly as fast as if you start drinking at 15.”

Alcohol affects teens differently from adults. While adults tend to get more subdued and slowed down by alcohol, in adolescents, it’s the opposite. They tend to become more energetic, engage in more risky behavior, and get more aggressive.

WHY IS ALCOHOL USE RISKIER FOR TEENAGERS?

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. 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. Kids who are depressed may use alcohol or marijuana to cheer themselves up. So if their peers are offering a drug that makes you happy, that’s often the first thing they turn to.” Substance use can quiet negative thoughts that plague depressed kids.

Why substance use makes depression & anxiety worse

“Self-medicating” with recreational drugs and alcohol works temporarily to alleviate symptoms of anxiety or depression because they affect the same brain regions that the disorders do. But the result is that teens feel even worse when not using. That’s one reason substance use is a risk factor for suicide in kids with depression, Dr. Taskiran notes.

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