

Jada's Journey 6-12 Art and Writing Competition

Category 2: Writing (short essay)

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Raising Awareness to "Stop the Stigma"

In today's world, so many things are uncertain and barely discussed. Our brains tend to fill in the gaps with ideas we pick up from unreliable sources such as our peers or the media. But sometimes these ideas are negative, and negative beliefs are usually oversimplified and lack context. Often, this turns into stereotypes and stigma, which leads to negative consequences for people and in some cases, the entire society. For example, the words 'substance abuse' bring images of creepy people hiding out in dark alleys and selling illegal drugs to people's minds. However, every person's experience is unique, and most people dealing with these challenges aren't like that at all, so it's unfair to stereotype and stigmatize them.

The basis of the stigma surrounding substance abuse and mental health issues is because of the lack of information about them. Substance use disorders aren't the person's fault—they are mental health conditions that lead to dependence on substances that affect your health. To us, quitting might seem easy, but in truth, it's extremely difficult. That's because substances release dopamine, a chemical that makes you feel good even if it negatively impacts your quality of life after it wears off. If you have a substance use disorder, your brain changes through a process called neuroplasticity and 'learns' that substances are more important than other activities that release dopamine like socializing or eating. Eventually, normal tasks won't satisfy you anymore, and you will rely on substances just to function. Plus, substance use disorders are often linked to other mental health issues—people with conditions like depression, anxiety, or PTSD may turn to drugs to cope. On the other hand, substance use can cause many of these conditions. If more people learn about that through direct community action, they'll understand that people using substances and managing mental health issues aren't bad people. That could help those people feel less ashamed about seeking help, and encourage more support overall. This can lead to a happier, safer life for themselves and their families. Some ways we can raise awareness in our communities are through education in schools, awareness events, and communicating with family and friends.

First, we can raise awareness through education in schools. Many people assume that kids are too young to understand these subjects, but knowledge is essential worldwide. According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 41.7% of teenagers in 12th grade have used alcohol at least once in their lifetime. These students probably never learned good ways to seek help! If we don't inform children, they could also end up using substances merely because they never fully understood the dangers—and they're not sinister drug dealers, they're the kids you see on the playground or at the ice cream store. Fortunately, there are many age-appropriate ways that can help students address these topics. Schools can deliver evidence-based prevention programs, and they can support students who are in recovery or whose family members are struggling with

addiction. They could also hold fundraisers or create clubs to raise money to spread knowledge and support. This way, we can raise awareness from a young age.

Another way we can raise awareness is by hosting awareness events. An awareness event is an initiative designed to educate people about the dangers of substance abuse, reduce stigma, and promote treatment and recovery. These events are often held during times like National Substance Abuse Prevention Month or National Recovery Month, and some common events are workshops and seminars discussing harm reduction, and rallies or walks to honor people grappling with substance abuse. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration held their Prevention Day this February, bringing together professionals from across the country to discuss prevention strategies. This year's theme was "Telling the Prevention Story", which focuses on sharing successful prevention stories and giving hope to others. Awareness events help because when the whole community is present, it gives people a chance to share their stories and realize that they're not alone.

Lastly, we can raise awareness by communicating more with family and friends. People dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues might be afraid to seek help among their loved ones. Being kind and showing that you are willing to listen without judgement can help people feel more confident and open up about their needs. Having frequent conversations that focus on kindness and not judgement can also help lift the stigma. It can help people understand that substance abuse disorders and mental health disorders are treatable health conditions, not moral failings or criminal tendencies.

To conclude, there's a lot of unfair stigma and stereotypes surrounding substance abuse and mental health issues. But the people navigating these aren't dangerous criminals—they're normal people who need help, and we can help by raising awareness in our community so we can support them. Whether it's through education in schools, awareness events, or open communication, we can tear down the stigma if we take some time to enlighten ourselves. Choosing compassion instead of judgment is an easy choice, but it can save lives.