

Self-Medicating: When Teens Turn to Substance Use as a Means to Cope

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 1 in every 25 teenagers aged 12-17 experience some kind of challenge with substance abuse. Teens may use substances for a variety of reasons including curiosity and peer pressure. However, research shows that many teens also turn to substance use as a means to “try and solve a problem”. For example, they may turn to drugs and alcohol as a means to escape emotional pain, deal with stress, relieve anxiety, or cope with traumatic experiences. Often referred to as self-medication, the use of drugs and/or alcohol becomes a maladaptive coping mechanism. Unfortunately, in an attempt to find temporary relief, this approach only masks the underlying problems and causes more harm. Additionally, mental health disorders and substance use are strongly linked. Research confirms that self-medication is one of the most common issues connecting mental health and substance abuse. When a mental health disorder goes undiagnosed, untreated, or undertreated, a young person may attempt to self-medicate their mental health symptoms. Studies show that ADHD, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression increase the risk of substance use in adolescents (Partnership to End Addiction).



Experts note that it is important for parents and caregivers to try to understand what may be driving youth to self-medicate by looking at changes in their behavior, moods, patterns, and habits. The combination of substance use and mental health disorders can create many challenges. Aside from the risk of developing a damaging addiction, many mental health symptoms are made worse by using drugs and/or alcohol. The adolescent brain is still developing and as such, the results of teenage self-medication can escalate from experimentation to a serious substance use disorder much faster than in adults. According to experts at the Child Mind Institute, that progression is more likely to happen in young people with mental health disorders compared to other adolescents.

The good news is, that research shows that identifying and treating mental health disorders can reduce substance use. Likewise, reducing substance use can improve treatment outcomes for mental health disorders. When youth are struggling with both substance use and mental health concerns, they may require treatment to address both issues. Treatment for co-occurring disorders may include therapy, medication, or a combination of the two.

Adults can play an important role in preventing self-medication. It is not uncommon for teens to keep their feelings hidden and try to cope with various issues or problems on their own. As such, when having conversations with youth about drugs and alcohol, incorporating education and awareness about the risks of self-medication as a means to cope with challenging experiences or feelings is an important piece. Promoting mental health awareness and helping teens foster healthy coping mechanisms can also reduce the risk of substance use. Below are some additional tips:

- Normalize Seeking Help: make it clear that seeking help for mental health concerns, substance use or other challenging experiences is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Offer emotional support to teens by listening without judgment and validating feelings.
- Open Dialogue: create safe spaces where teens can share their experiences, concerns, and challenges.
- Promote mental wellness by helping teens foster healthy habits like good sleep, mindfulness, and stress management skills.

References: American Addiction Centers; Child Mind Institute; Partnership to End Addiction; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)