

Addiction: Our Children are the Victims

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STRONGER THAN ADDICTION

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ADDICTION IS A PROFOUND PUBLIC-HEALTH CRISIS.



More than 22 million Americans suffer every day with addiction to alcohol and other drugs.



More than 100 million family members share their pain.



Addiction sneaks up on our teens and leads to a cycle of shame, isolation, failure — and, far too often, death.

Unlike any other major disease, there is a relatively narrow window when addiction develops: it nearly always originates during adolescence. The pre-frontal lobe, the area of the brain where decision-making, judgment and self-control reside, is the last area of the brain to develop, usually in the early 20's. This makes adolescents particularly vulnerable to alcohol and other drugs. Drugs arrest the development of the pre-frontal lobe and target the brain's reward system, literally changing brain circuitry. All of this combines to make it

nearly impossible for many adolescents to stop use once they start. Approximately eighty percent of those who are currently addicted began using alcohol and other drugs before the age of 18.

SEVERAL RISK FACTORS VASTLY INCREASE SUSCEPTIBILITY TO ADDICTION, INCLUDING:

- Early age of first use
- Family history/genetic predisposition
- Dysfunctional families
- ADHD or other learning disabilities
- Anxiety, depression or other mental health conditions
- Poverty
- Negative peer pressure and bullying

EVIDENCE OF POWERFUL NEGATIVE TRENDS

Marijuana

Marijuana is 300% more potent now than 20 years ago. It causes significant changes to blood flow in the brain, leading to diminished cognition and judgment. It has also been linked to significant, permanent decreases in IQ and increases in serious health problems. Over the past four years, marijuana use among high school students has exploded: daily use has increased nearly 30%.

Prescription Pills

Although not limited to adolescents, the non-medical use of prescription pills is now an epidemic, claiming more lives than heroin and cocaine combined and recently surpassing the annual number of deaths from traffic accidents. This exponential growth among all age groups is tied directly to the massive increase in legitimate prescriptions written by doctors.

Alcohol

Alcohol remains the most widely used addictive substance, and recent studies have shown that it – even more than marijuana – is the most significant “gateway” drug, leading to use of more harmful substances. Approximately 25% of high school seniors, and 40% of those in college, binge drink (defined as consuming five or more drinks on one occasion) on a monthly basis.

OTHER ALARMING FACTS

- Combining drugs raises the risks of brain damage, heart attack, stroke and overdose exponentially. An average of 2.7 drugs is involved in every fatal overdose.
- More 12- and 13-year olds in the U.S. get high by sniffing inhalants than by using marijuana, cocaine and hallucinogens combined.
- New dangerous drugs have emerged, including synthetic drugs such as K2 and Spice; “Bath Salts;” and “Lean” or “Purple Drank,” which are mixtures of over-the-counter medicine, soda and candy.

HOW DOES IT BEGIN?

Despite the staggering facts about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs, and the scope of the addiction

crisis, the onset of the problem in almost every case is insidious and invisible. No adolescent believes that he or she could ever become addicted, and few parents understand how vulnerable their children really are. Due to curiosity and peer pressure, most children casually use alcohol or other drugs – the National Survey on Drug Use and Health reports well over 80% of high school seniors have tried alcohol and over 50% have tried other drugs. The downward spiral begins: It is unimaginable that anyone would hide from or deny the presence of cancer, diabetes or heart disease, but addiction almost always lives in the dark. Teens hide their drug use. Parents are unaware of, or even in denial about, their children's behavior. While only 10% of parents believe their child has had alcohol in the past year, (and 15% are unsure), in reality, 45% of adolescents have consumed alcohol in the past year. Similarly, while only 5% of parents believe their child has used marijuana in the past year, (and 10% are unsure), the actual number is 25%. There is typically no useful dialogue at the dinner table about the dangers of alcohol and other drug use. Worse, doctors, nurses and other clinicians don't know the signs to look for: only 30% of medical professionals feel prepared enough to identify alcohol or other drug use. Therefore the potential path toward addiction continues uninterrupted.

Teens and their parents do not comprehend the life-threatening risks of substance abuse. The medical community is ill-equipped to identify and treat the problem, parents feel lost and helpless, and, more broadly, society would prefer not to deal with people who are seen as making poor choices, or having weak characters. Yet this disease directly or indirectly affects roughly one in every three people in our country. It must be brought out from the darkness and into the light so that it can receive the attention, compassion and funding it needs. Our children's lives depend upon it.

Shatterproof is a national organization committed to protecting our loved ones from addiction to alcohol or other drugs and ending the stigma and suffering of those affected by this disease.

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