

Employee Assistance Program: Drugs and Teenagers

If you have teenagers, one of your major concerns is probably keeping them off drugs. According to the Drug Addiction Research Foundation, 22 per cent of Ontario school children from ages 11 to 19 used illegal drugs in 1987. No less threatening is alcohol, which although legal, is nonetheless a drug and is widely used by teens. What can a parent do to cope with this problem? Gaining a fuller understanding is often the first stage in dealing with the problem. We must therefore ask the following question: how does one recognize the initial signs and symptoms, before irreparable damage is done? This is the question addressed in the following article.

Let us first consider the definition of the word "drug": a drug is any substance other than food that is absorbed to alter the way in which the body or mind functions. Drugs fall into various classifications, including: cannabis (marijuana, hashish); hallucinogens (LSD, PCP, or "angel dust", mescaline) and analgesics/narcotics, (heroin); sedatives and hypnotizers (seconal, nembrital, and alcohol); tranquilizers (valium) and stimulants (cocaine, caffeine and tobacco). Drug abuse refers to consumption that results in problems of health, marital, family and social relations, and difficulties on the job or at school. Financial and legal problems might be added to this list. It is very difficult to describe a typical teen drug abuser. He is not necessarily a failure at school or a juvenile delinquent. He is not necessarily unhappy at home, and may or may not be popular and well-adjusted. Nearly all drug abuse begins with curiosity. The use of certain drugs such as cannabis is sufficiently widespread that most teens do not have to look far to satisfy their curiosity. Many

continue to consume drugs because of peer pressure: they do not wish to feel left out or different, and thus, they succumb to pressures to make them feel part of the group, whatever the cost.

What types of symptoms or behaviour can alert you to the existence of a problem?

The symptoms most common to all users, regardless of the drug are the following:

1. Disappearance of clothing or personal items from the house.
2. Tendency to remain alone at home or to go out for long periods of time.
3. Inability to hold a job or to continue schooling.
4. Rejection of old friends; keeping bad company.
5. Loss, or sharp increase of appetite.
6. Extreme tiredness; frequent changes of behaviour.
7. Common use of drug related jargon such as "pot", "hash", "smack", "speed", etc.

Some of these symptoms may, of course, arise from causes other than drug consumption. One must not jump to conclusions.

What should you do if you suspect that your teenager is taking drugs? If you are hesitant because you do not know how to raise the issue, you may wish to speak to your EAP counselor or to the community resources that provide services for young drug users and their parents.

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