

Preventing Illicit Drug Use on College Campuses

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As a freshman in college I was prepared for the transition from home cooked meals to dining hall food and the adjustment to constant interaction, but I didn't anticipate the intense social focus on substance use. Alcohol and marijuana use were talked about in high school, but conversations about substances like cocaine, opioids and hallucinogens were taboo and avoided. This quickly changed within my first few days at college. I heard a student joke about "the inevitable Adderall supply chain," and another comment about which fraternities would eventually supply cocaine and ecstasy.

I was taken aback by these students' willingness to try "hard drugs" that are known for their potency and damaging consequences. Why are these types of substances more normalized on college campuses? Are they really used by so many students?

THE REALITY OF ILLICIT DRUG USE AT COLLEGE

Despite my initial alarm at hearing these statements, the use of illicit drugs on college campuses is uncommon. The people who do engage with illicit substances tend to stand out more than the majority who do not and their experiences are disproportionately amplified. Just as people in high school who periodically skipped class spoke frequently about ditching in an attempt to normalize it and entice others to do the same. Similarly, students in college who use illicit drugs tend to make their experiences seem more common than they actually are.

According to national data from the 2020 [Monitoring the Future](#) study sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 16.2% of full-time college students report trying any illicit drug other than marijuana¹ in the past year. When broken down, it is clear that a relatively small percentage of college students have used illicit drugs, despite the prevailing narrative at some schools. In 2020, 8.6% reported using hallucinogens like LSD, ecstasy and mushrooms, 3.8% of full-time college students report using cocaine within the past year, 6.5% report using unprescribed amphetamines including Ritalin and Adderall, 2.6% reported using tranquilizers and 0.3% reported using ketamine.

WHAT ARE THE TANGIBLE HARMS OF USING ILLICIT DRUGS AS A COLLEGE STUDENT?

Some studies have found that substance use among college students [has increased over the past decade](#), while others find [uneven trends](#), with increases in only certain forms of illicit drug use. The far-reaching and [lasting consequences](#), many of which can affect academic functioning, include impaired brain development and cognitive functioning, including memory, attention, judgment and decision-making; increased risk for mental health and physical problems; heightened rates of unintentional injury and risky sex; and potential fatality. Many of my peers are aware of these long-term effects but feel disconnected from them. Young people often believe they would never become so involved in drug use that they would suffer those consequences or they can't imagine their drug use progressing to addiction and the health conditions that follow.

After speaking about substance use with friends from high school and college, I realized that conveying the short-term dangers of drug use can have a stronger impact than long-term dangers. College students who use illicit drugs often [exhibit significantly lower academic performance](#) and experience higher rates of unemployment after graduation. A [recent study](#) also found that 54% of students who indicated misuse of prescription stimulants in the last year skipped class because of it. These concrete consequences may be more convincing for some academically driven students than learning about the longer-term effects of drugs.

Students who are entrenched in “college party life” often benefit from being reminded of [immediate negative effects](#) like the correlation between sexual assault and drug use, impaired academic and athletic performance and increased frequency of life-threatening overdoses or accidental injuries. It is important to teach young people about all the consequences of substance use and that the immediate consequences often resonate more than future outcomes.

INCENTIVES TO STEER CLEAR OF SUBSTANCES ON CAMPUS

I came into college hoping to find academic passions, develop my sense of self and discover who I want to be. Like most young adults, I approached college as a time to experience opportunity and possibility. No student enters these crucial years planning to develop an addiction, so helping students stay in touch with their goals and values while navigating a complicated social environment can help prevent substance use.

Drug use and addiction can ruin or strain relationships with friends and family and creating close friendships without the presence of substances will lead to more genuine and lasting relationships. Although the process of making friends during the first few months of college can feel stressful, approaching it without the impaired judgement, physical dangers and addictive mindset that substance use can induce will facilitate a more positive transition.

One main reason students use illicit substances in college is to deal with [academic or social stress](#). Substances are not a sustainable or beneficial long-term coping mechanism and, if struggling, students are better off leaning into social networks, exercise, clubs, therapy or support groups, which are often free on campuses. Choosing to pursue passions like music or art and reaching out to connections from home are much healthier ways to deal with discomfort or anxiety in a new place.

It’s also critical for students to be aware of the heightened pressure to use stimulants to cope with academic pressure. According to Welsh and colleagues, the number of [first-time stimulant users](#) peaks during college final-exam weeks. Contrary to what many students believe, use of non-prescribed stimulants can actually [hinder academic achievement](#), while it has never been associated with an [improvement in GPA](#).

THE ROLE OF PROVIDERS AND PARENTS

Transitioning from high school can feel overwhelming and hearing casual talk about illicit substances can be unsettling, but turning to drugs to avoid anxiety, relieve stress, fit in or for distraction will almost always be harmful. Providers can encourage students to think critically about substance use and their wellbeing with open-ended questions like, “How do your drinking patterns fits with your plans to take your education further?” “Can you tell me about your use of alcohol and drugs?” and “Where does your current behavior leave you and what’s the next step?” As a student, questions like “What values will my long-term friends have?” “What are the potential negative consequences of taking a drug right now?”, and “Do I want potential addiction to shape my college experience?” remind students of the consequences and dangers of using drugs.

College counselors, mental health providers and other mentors on college campuses like resident advisors can help by starting open and honest conversations that provide resources and guidance in the beginning of the year and throughout student’s time at school. Providers on college campuses can look to resources like [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention](#) or [Campus Drug Prevention’s Practitioner’s Toolkit](#). Parents also continue to play an invaluable role in helping guide students’ substance-related attitudes and behaviors and should not assume that their influence ends just because their child has moved on to college.

BACKGROUND: [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention](#) addresses the rising concern of youth-substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic through the creation of a comprehensive message guide and toolkit to equip youth-serving providers with enhanced skills for delivering meaningful substance use prevention messaging.

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