



Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic

From Opioid Addict to Respected Educator

Jeanne Blake: It's great to see you Joel, thanks for joining me.

Joel Levine: No problem. Jeanne, it's great to great to be talking with you again.

Jeanne: Again, yeah, we first talked, it's hard to imagine in 2006, when I interviewed you for our video, *Drugs: True Stories*. You're 18 years in recovery. Congratulations. That's fantastic.

Joel: Thank you so much.

Jeanne: I want to start by showing a clip of that video [*Drugs: True Stories*] where you describe starting using substances in middle school – alcohol and marijuana. Let's listen:

Joel Levine in Drugs: True Stories: "My father being a school superintendent, I had a lot of pressure to do well in school. Everybody expected me to excel in sports." *Narration: Joel didn't realize he was headed down a dangerous path. One day at the local mall, a guy Joel knew from school offered him marijuana.* "I just wanted to be associated with kids people thought were popular and cool. I did it with drugs. We went out into the parking lot and we smoked, I was stoned, I was happy. Within a few hours that feeling was gone. I was back to being my normal self – I wasn't stoned Joel anymore. I had to deal with everyday life, my problems, my feelings, the stress of living up to everybody's expectations."

Jeanne: What's it like to be taken back to that time in your life?

Joel: It's very real, even today. Not with myself, but with students and athletes I see today. Especially with things that have gone on in the last two and a half years. Kids have stresses and anxieties about school, work, and family. It's at such a greater level now. Students have a tough time getting up and even coming to a social setting like school.

Jeanne: In 10th grade someone offered you an Oxycontin. Then you really spiraled into addiction. Today, we know fentanyl, as public health experts warn, is everywhere.

Joel: It really is. It's so much more dangerous being a drug addict today than it was even 20 years ago. Fentanyl is laced in everything – heroin, cocaine, fake pills – you're taking a chance with your life. Anytime you ingest any of those things into your body you're playing Russian Roulette. So many people are dying today.

Jeanne: How are you helping kids you work with, as a teacher and baseball coach, understand that reality?

Joel: I try to be open and honest with them and let them know decisions they make today can affect the rest of their lives. Good decisions, good things can happen. If you make poor decisions, you may go down a tough road. It's so important to make the right decision now as a youngster, and not get yourself into situations I got myself into.

Jeanne: You show incoming freshmen your video. That's quite courageous on your part..

Joel: Thank you. I look forward to it every year. I strongly believe it helps me build strong relationships with students. Students are much more willing to open up their lives to me because I've opened up my life to them. For example – I'm

talking 10 years later – I gained trust in one of my former players and students who had seen the video and knew what went on in my life. When he was struggling with an issue, he had no problem reaching out and asking me for help. That just goes to show you how important a trusting adult can be to young adolescents and teenagers.

Jeanne: Your mom and dad talked in the video about the denial they had. They hoped you were just being a typical teen. Let's listen to a clip of your dad.

Herb Levine in Drugs: True Stories: "Denial is wishing it away. Give us a reason to believe you, and we'll believe you. Give us just a morsel of truth, and we'll believe you. Give us something we can hang our hat on that we can discuss at the dinner table privately and say, 'Well, you know, he did do this.' I remember discussions like, how could he be on drugs if he's getting B's and Cs in high school? Don't those kids fail?"

Jeanne: It's hard for parents to know when to worry. What do you want parents to know?

Joel: Seeing and hearing my father, that's how he felt. That's how he and my mother felt. They were in denial. They didn't want to believe their child was any different than anybody else. You need to be able to see the signs as an adult or parent that your child is struggling. Or, they're at least being made aware drugs and alcohol are out there and easily obtainable. If you start young and have open dialogue with your children, you're going to gain trust. Hopefully in doing that, you'll be able to see more what's going on in their life to prevent something like this.

Jeanne: It was accessible when you were using and, from everything we hear, drugs are even more accessible than then.

Joel: Oh, absolutely. With vape pens, the accessibility of marijuana, and other pills and hard drugs, it's very easy for teenagers to get whatever they want. Just a text message or Snapchat.

Jeanne: It was your best friend at the time – who you're still good friends with – Brian, who made the difference in your life. He went to your mom and dad. That takes a lot of guts to do that for a kid.

Joel: Absolutely. He says in the video he would rather lose a friendship than a friend – because that's the path I was going down. He had no problem contacting my father and letting him know the things I was doing and the trouble I was getting into. It takes courage, especially for a teenager, to do that. And to be quite frank, he saved my life.

Jeanne: Now you're continuing to spread the word, through your work, through your relationships with your students. Joel, thanks for taking time to talk.

Joel: My pleasure, Jeanne. Great seeing you.

Jeanne: Thank you.

See Additional Resources for
***Drugs: True Stories* (30-minute video with Discussion Guide)**
***Words Can Work: When Talking About Drugs* (Booklet)**

This interview was edited for brevity

Jeanne Blake, Blake Works CEO and creator of *Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic*, is a leadership communication coach, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.

Joel Levine is a teacher and head baseball coach in Everett, MA and was featured in *Words Can Work's* video *Drugs: True Stories*.