



Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic

Drugs and the Brain

Why using drugs to cope with stress is dangerous

Dr. H. Westley Clark: It's a bad thing because drugs take on a life of their own. Instead of coping with stress, while initially you may be coping, ultimately your life is far more stressful than you can ever imagine.

Dr. Howard J. Shaffer: From a parent's point of view, one of their jobs is to raise children who can be stress resilient, meaning they're going to experience stress in their life and have to learn better ways of coping. That's a parent's job to teach their children those ways. Children can also learn ways on their own. We have scientific evidence that exercise is good for dealing with stress. Eating a good diet – very good for stress. Learning to relax and meditate – good way to reduce stress. Reading, getting along with friends, socializing, going to a movie – all good ways for dealing with stress.

How repeated drug use can harm the brain

Dr. Clark: With frequent use, or chronic use, you change the brain's ability to function normally. Some ways are not as clear as other ways.

Dr. Shaffer: All drugs that affect the way you feel are affecting your brain. They're influencing how the brain works. They influence the chemistry of the brain and the way brain cells communicate with each other.

Dr. Clark: One reason people do drugs is because it affects areas of the brain that causes them to feel pleasure. We call those the pleasure centers. They stimulate those pleasure centers using drugs and become addicted by having repeated stimulation of the pleasure centers and discovering the pleasure centers don't respond as well with chronic use. Each time I use the drug, the pleasure center responds less and less.

Why some deny kids' drug use

Dr. Clark: Think about being in a situation where you're busy, you love your child, you've got your own life to lead — especially for adolescents, they're in their own small universes. You want to be respectful. You want to be optimistic. The denial factor is able to feed off your optimism, your desire to be a good parent, and your wish that nothing adverse is happening to your child. Reality, on the other hand, says, 'Wait a minute. I see or hear about changes in function. There are only a limited number of things that can cause this. I need to rule out alcohol and drugs not just by my child saying it isn't happening, but I need to do some other things."

How to respond to warning signs of drug abuse

Dr. Clark: If you've got a child whose behavior has changed fairly dramatically, the first thing you want to explore is whether drugs or alcohol are present. Because of denial, the kid is going to say, "No, you're wrong." But parents need to keep that in mind that loss of school function, loss of friendships or extracurricular activity can be due to a number of things, but drugs and alcohol remain up there. And because of denial, you have to keep that in the forefront of your brain: "Gee, the behavior is not changing to the positive, so something must be going on."

Whether parents should disclose their own drug use

Dr. Shaffer: Parents disclosing drug use is a tricky issue. For some children it would be protective. They'll understand their parents are human and had experiences that are important. For other children it'll simply give them license to use drugs. Just like all the prevention techniques and strategies people have, we have to be different with different children. We have to understand what our children are going through and how they might use this. We can't predict with certainty how

they'll react to this kind of information. But I do think it can be useful for some children, and for other children it can be harmful.

Why being involved in kids' lives is protective

Dr. Shaffer: Parents need to be very involved in their children's life. They need to have channels of communication open. They need to ask questions. Sometimes children are perturbed a bit by questions, but parents need to keep asking. They need to show interest. By showing interest, children know they are cared for and monitored, that parents are aware of what's going on. Children are simply less likely to get in trouble when parents are actively involved in their life on a day-to-day basis.

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 advisor, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.

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