



## Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic

### *Kids, Mental Health and Marijuana*

#### Reasons Kids Use

**Dr. Kevin Hill:** Kids are using marijuana for a variety of reasons these days. The top reason would be to de-stress or try to manage difficult situations they're in. Number two would be anxiety and third would be to improve sleep.

**Jeanne Blake:** I'm also hearing from young people that they're using marijuana to self-medicate and they believe it's fine to do so.

**Dr. Hill:** That's a common thing that I hear as well in my practice. Normalization of using marijuana is what we see now when we're constantly talking about medical marijuana and legalization of marijuana and so kids are looking for ways to manage uncomfortable feelings and they see marijuana as a way to do this. A recent young woman I treated came from a local prestigious high school and wasn't doing well in high school. Her parents found out she was using marijuana regularly. She said she used it to manage anxiety. She wasn't going to class, her grades had been dipping, and she was concerned about whether she'll get into the universities she had set her sights on. We had a discussion about why she was using marijuana. Again, she felt like this was helping her manage uncomfortable feelings of anxiety so we talked about the ways in which marijuana over time, it's not a good long term treatment strategy for anxiety.

#### Healthy Ways to Cope

**Jeanne:** How can we help young people find healthier ways to cope?

**Dr. Hill:** We can help them by encouraging open and honest conversations about those types of feelings. We have to understand that feeling anxious or depressed is normal. Sometimes you're going to feel that way. And there are other ways to manage it rather than turning to substances.

#### Scare Tactics Don't Work

**Dr. Hill:** We can't scare kids. It doesn't work. We have to talk about it in a sensible way. We have to understand that marijuana use is a risky proposition, particularly for kids under 25 when their brains are developing. That said, it's important to point out that most kids who use marijuana don't have the cognitive difficulties or worsening depression or anxiety that some do. The idea that some kids may have significant problems is something we need to introduce. But you should also understand that the real motivators for change for a young person are more practical – more tangible things like, "I really want to get into this university" or "I really want to play in the sectionals in two weeks" or "I want to be able to drive the family car." Those types of things will get them to make changes, not the studies that show they could lose up to eight points of IQ.

#### Marijuana and the Developing Brain

**Dr. Hill:** Marijuana has a very strong effect upon the brain primarily because one of the main types of marijuana receptors, cannabinoid receptor-CB1 receptor – is located primarily in the brain. So, marijuana use – when the brain is still developing – is especially risky. We've seen a number of problems, cognitive difficulties. While the frontal lobes that are associated with decision making and judgment are being developed, marijuana can interfere with that. And we've seen in studies

done at McLean, and other places, that young marijuana users use different parts of their brain to get the same amount of work done. The analogy I use is that if you're revving an engine at very high RPMs all the time you may get where you want to go, but it's not a long-term strategy for health of that engine. Similarly, marijuana use at a young age is not a good long-term strategy for health of your brain.

### **Open Communication**

**Jeanne:** Parents know they need to talk with kids openly and honestly. But knowing that and doing that are two different things. How do you encourage parents to build this open communication and keep it going?

**Dr. Hill:** It's very difficult to maintain and build open lines of communication particularly in this day and age of technology and smart phones. If you go into a restaurant, you see a family eating a meal together, they're all looking at their phone. Therefore, talking about things is different and can set you apart in some ways. I have kids and I ask them all the time about what's going on, how they're doing, how'd their day go. They don't always want to tell me on my timeline about what's going on. But you have to ask. You have to be interested. If you're expressing that type of interest – also about difficult situations and topics – they'll be more likely to come to you when it's important for them.

### **If You Suspect Use?**

**Dr. Hill:** If they think their child is using marijuana, I would encourage parents to say, "I'm worried about you. I think you need an evaluation." That way you're not passing judgment. You're not making a diagnosis. You're just saying, "I'm concerned about the way things are going and wonder if there's more going on. Those other things may require some treatment."

*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.**

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