

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

1330 Lincoln Ave #201, San Rafael, CA 94901-2141

Phone (415) 459-5999 Fax (415) 459-5602 www.cipmarin.org

2019-2020 News & Notes



January 2020 News and Notes

Teenage Substance Abuse and Addiction: Approaches for Parents

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

The Problem

The “opioid epidemic” continues to be a news headline as prescription pill overdoses exceed 100 per day nationally. Parents baffled by their kids’ “screen addiction” have no answers. Law enforcement warnings about fentanyl, a cheap-to-make high strength opioid added to heroin (and now to cocaine and even marijuana) appear regularly. Legal marijuana is readily available in the forms of candy, flower, vapes, and baked confections. Marin County teens abuse alcohol at a rate as high as or higher than anywhere in the nation.

Parents feel powerless. So, too, do coaches, teachers, clergy, siblings and others close to a teen or young adult who’s caught in the sinking spiral of compulsive substance use, screen dependency, or full-blown addiction.

The Background

Teens are naturally curious, experimental and driven to high risk-taking. They are biologically wired to seek the new, the novel, the different, the exciting, the mood altering, and the comfort of belonging. The continuation of our species depends on this. If it weren’t the case, teens wouldn’t fight our wars, win our football games, or brave encountering mean old Mr. Johnson and his swinging bat in order to get a “hello” from his daughter, Jessica. As Kevin T. McCauley, MD, explains in his book *Pleasure Unwoven*, the teen brain attaches intense meaning to activities, events/places, or substances that provide a feeling of belonging, power, or relief from anxiety.

Some teens, estimated at about 20%, have a genetic predisposition to prefer being under the influence of mood-altering substances or behaviors. They’re most often found in families with histories of addiction, or “stress-induced impaired coping,” as described in my book *Freedom from Family Dysfunction*. These epigenetic forces encourage teens to keep using or “partying” despite mounting evidence they themselves can see of the destructive consequences. People who love these youngsters see the insanity and can’t believe the teen doesn’t; however, that’s exactly the cunning, baffling and powerful nature of addiction.

Solutions

Solutions begin with self-examination and inquiry initiated by the parents in teen households. Here are a few initial questions to take up:

- Can we expect a teen to be 100% abstinent given the damage to their brains caused by alcohol binges or chronic marijuana use (>50 times/year)? Why not?
- What’s the difference between normal partying or problematic drinking or using?
- How do we factor our own drinking, marijuana or prescription drug use into our expectations for our teens and college kids?

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

1330 Lincoln Ave #201, San Rafael, CA 94901-2141

Phone (415) 459-5999 Fax (415) 459-5602 www.cipmarin.org

2019-2020 News & Notes



Starting in this way, family members will be able to:

- Recognize the warning signs of substance abuse or compulsive behaviors that can or have become addiction
- Identify the family environmental features perpetuating or promoting substance abuse or addictive behaviors
- Build a network of allies who “get it” to manage stress-induced impaired coping and avoid so-called “enabling”
- Establish minimum requirements (including total abstinence when indicated) around screen time and substance use to establish a safe and sustainable home
- Speak to the forces contributing to systemic and societal anxiety exacerbating teen restlessness while supporting teens’ creativity and search for meaning

Dr. Kenneth Perlmutter is a licensed, San Rafael, CA, based Family Systems Psychologist with more than 30 years’ experience treating complex psychological disorders including addiction. He founded the Family Recovery Institute in 2008 to provide individual and family treatment services, clinical training, consultation and supervision. *Freedom from Family Dysfunction: A Guide for Families Battling Addiction or Mental Illness*, published in late 2019, reveals his theory and method in easy to understand and relatable terms.