



## Breaking Through Denial

Parents are often unaware of the extent of their child's substance use in its early stage. Like an iceberg, they may only be seeing 10% of the problem while thinking they know the full extent of the problem. Parents who discover substance use experience dismay, which is often quickly replaced with denial. Breaking through denial is the first step to discovering the depth of the problem.

### How a Parent Responds

Ideally, parents want to be prepared to discern if a [problem](#) with substance use exists and to get the appropriate assistance if required. In reality, emotions often come into play. Try to regroup and be logical about the situation. Knowing the facts will be essential to breaking through denial.

How parents discover a problem can greatly affect the response. Finding a beer bottle in the teen's bedroom will undoubtedly get a different response than getting a call from the police or the principal. For parents who receive that call, the possibility that their child has a significant problem becomes a reality. As they mobilize their emotional resources, treatment professionals can become allies to help parents regain their role as the head of the household.

### Parents Need Facts

Parents want to believe what their teen tells them. "I tried it once" or "It's really no big deal" may be lies, but they comfort a parent searching for answers. If they believe their adolescent was

"experimenting," parents feel less concerned. Breaking through denial starts when you understand the facts about substance use and a teenager's actual behaviors. With facts, a parent can make a healthy, rational decision about the next steps. When your child tells you that "everyone" is doing something, make sure they are telling the truth.

In reality, [research](#) shows that 40% of high school seniors have never tried an illegal substance (including alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana). Experimenting is far from a universal [experience](#). Even fewer teens use before their senior year.

Roughly 10% of teenagers are regular substance users (one time a week or more). Only one of ten regular users gets any treatment for their substance use disorder. Regular users are sometimes able to stop on their own, but without intervention, most end up continuing a pattern of use over their lifetime.

## Teens can Look Apologetic While Hiding the Truth

Upon discovering substance use, parents are often talking with their teen about the perils of drug use, risks, family rules and values. Consequently, parents see remorse in their child's eyes. They get the teen's promise that they will stop using, and parents truly believe the problem is resolved. This is most often a short-term solution. We receive calls each week from parents who wish that they had begun treatment months or years ago.

Teen guilt is usually a response to getting caught, not a result of feeling bad about behaviors. Teens don't want to change their behaviors, but they do want to avoid conflict. Adolescents will say nearly anything in order to avoid having parental interference.

## Denial is Worse when Parents Avoid Conflict

Understanding the truth will help when breaking through denial. Parents become afraid to confront their teens because they want to maintain a close relationship. Family [connection](#) is an important goal, but if it paralyzes you from being a good parent, it will backfire. Parents must be leaders in the family. Teens and young adults continue to need their guidance to learn how to make good decisions.

Discovering your teen has used a substance does not mean s/he has a problem. Avoiding a discussion about the use is to deny the possibility of a problem. Become your own investigator. Listen to your child, but examine what evidence you have found. Review the text messages on your teen's cell phone to be sure that you are not being lied to. If your teen refuses access to their cell phone (especially if you are paying for it) there is a good chance they are hiding something

from you. Research ways teens hide messages and pictures using apps. (These often look like calculators.) If you just accept everything your child tells you without first examining all the facts, you are in denial.

## Breaking Through Denial

Denial is not a terminal illness. 'Trust but verify' can become the new mantra for your family. This can protect your child and help avoid an unexpected call from the school or the police.

Encouraging, accepting, and knowledgeable professionals will assist in finding treatment options when necessary. Breaking through denial means accepting the critical need for help and beginning treatment immediately if it is needed.

ASAP is available to consult with parents who discover a problem. Call 513.792.1272 to set up an [assessment](#) or get more information about our [programs](#).