

The Reality of Adolescent Substance Use

The idea that 'everyone is doing it,' feels true to the adolescent but is likely to be inaccurate. Teens often feel as though more of their peers are engaging in risky behaviors than studies show to be true.

'Pluralistic ignorance' is a phenomenon that may be at work. This is defined as a perception that grossly overestimates how many peers are drinking, smoking, and becoming sexual. Surveys show that adolescents exaggerate what their peers are doing by more than two times. They firmly believe that everyone is having more fun and not suffering the consequences. This belief makes change more difficult.

Social Media Distorts Reality

Even with all their communication (texting, tweeting, calling, emailing, and talking) teens perceive the actions of their group leader as the norm. Actually, the group leader is typically engaged in more risky behaviors than most of their peers. This distortion of the true nature of substance use means teens are getting some misinformation.

Adolescents brag about certain behaviors but are silent about things they don't do. This behavior helps distort reality. It also perpetuates the misperceptions. Teens act the way they *believe* their

peers are acting to avoid rejection. Bronson and Merryman report, "Scholars have repeatedly found that kids' perception of how much their friends are smoking or using drugs and alcohol is a better predictor of the kids' future use than their friends' actual use."

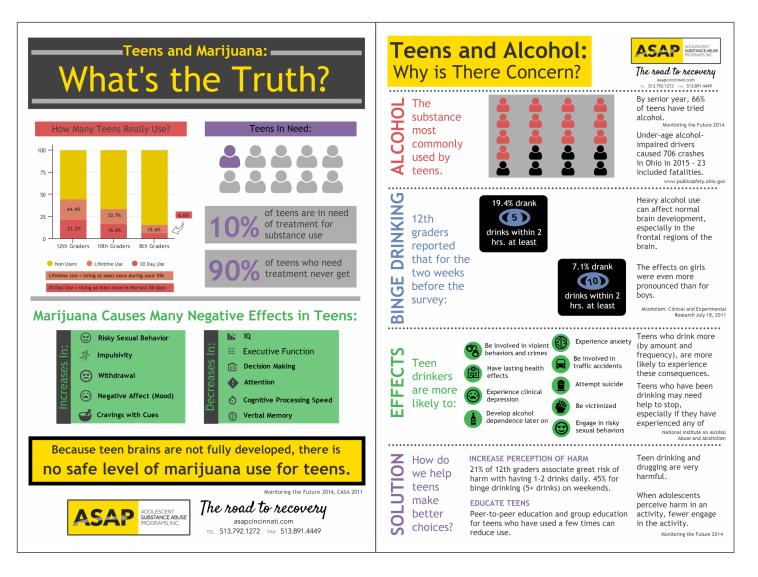
This adolescent belief provides us with a new perspective. It also helps us intervene by acknowledging their beliefs and providing alternatives to the obvious misperceptions. This becomes a key concept in adolescent substance use treatment. This is one starting place to engage teens who struggle to let go of this way to relieve pain or find pleasure.

What's the Truth?

Click on the links for below for PDF versions:

Teens and Marijuana: What's the Truth?

Teens and Alcohol: Why is there Concern?



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