

HELPING YOUR TEEN COPE WITH

Traumatic Stress and Substance Abuse



All parents hope that their child will grow up without experiencing major difficulties, but sometimes things we never expect can happen. When kids go through stressful and difficult circumstances, they might turn to alcohol and drugs in an attempt to deal with their feelings. Compared to teenagers who are not struggling with these issues, kids with emotional problems and ongoing stress are at greater risk for developing alcohol and drug dependence.

This pamphlet was created to help parents and caregivers who believe their teenagers might be experiencing problems as a result of traumatic stress and substance abuse. You'll find information about why these problems often occur simultaneously, tips on how to help your teen cope with trauma and stay drug-free, and where to go if your teen needs more help.



What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is a situation in which a person perceives grave threat to their physical self or their very life or that of someone close to them. Examples include being involved in or witnessing natural or man-made disasters, violent crimes, automobile accidents, life-threatening illness, sexual abuse, and physical abuse. Teenagers' response to trauma varies. Some seem to show few, if any, problems as a result of being involved in a traumatic event. Others may go on to develop long-lasting problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

How can I tell if my teenager has PTSD?

PTSD is an intense emotional and physical response that can be triggered by reminders of the traumatic event. Symptoms are generally classified into three categories:

1. **Reexperiencing:** Having nightmares, flashbacks, and physical or emotional responses to reminders of the event.
2. **Avoidance:** Avoiding feelings, thoughts, people, places, or activities that might remind the teenager of the event, and sometimes having feelings of being outside of oneself or disconnected from others.
3. **Increased arousal:** Being easily startled, having outbursts of anger, having difficulty sleeping or concentrating, feeling increasingly irritable, or frequently being on guard for danger.

Teens with PTSD sometimes develop problems with their peers, avoid school, or exhibit antisocial behavior (e.g., lack of regard for social rules and norms, ignoring the safety of self and others, etc.). They may also have any of the following: suicidal thoughts, increased difficulties associated with school, depression, and anxiety. For these reasons, it is not surprising that teens might turn to alcohol or drugs to try to get away from the problems associated with PTSD.

What are some signs that my teenager might be using alcohol or drugs?

- ⇒ **Academic changes:** Dramatic drop in grades or in the ability or willingness to do school work; skipping school
- ⇒ **Social changes:** Developing new friends but unwilling to introduce them to family; lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities; decreased attention to physical appearance or cleanliness
- ⇒ **Behavior changes:** More forgetful, distracted, jittery, or aggressive; secretive behavior (e.g., locking bedroom door, lying about where they go, sneaking out of the house); increase in borrowing money from family or friends; stealing money; dramatic changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- ⇒ **Attitude changes:** Significant drop in motivation; withdrawal from responsibilities; being less cooperative



What are the signs of long-lasting substance abuse problems?

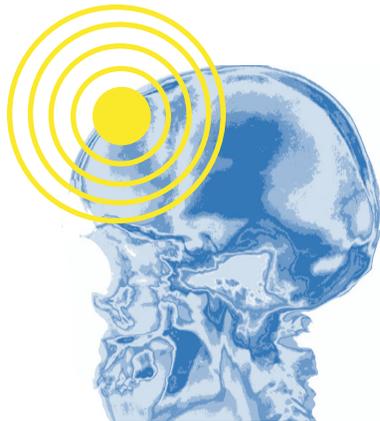
Because alcohol and other drugs have such powerful effects on a teenager's emotional experience, the teen can quickly turn from recreational or occasional use to more serious patterns of drug abuse or dependence.

- ⇒ **Drug abuse** refers to a pattern of use in which a person continues to consume drugs or alcohol in spite of very serious associated problems. Drug-abusing teenagers may fail to fulfill major responsibilities, use drugs in situations that are physically dangerous to them, have serious legal problems, or have ongoing problems with friends or family.
- ⇒ **Drug dependence** is a more serious pattern of use. As with abuse, the teenager continues to use drugs despite the negative consequences. The adolescent might give up other activities (such as sports or hobbies) that he or she previously enjoyed because drugs become more important, to the point that virtually all of the teen's daily activities might revolve around drug use. He or she may try unsuccessfully many times to use less or to stop using altogether.
- ⇒ The more that alcohol or drugs are used, the more likely they can lead to **tolerance**, which is the need to take increasingly more in order to be intoxicated or to get the desired effect. The teen might spend a lot more time obtaining and using the drug as well as recovering from its effects. When the teen becomes physically dependent and then tries to use less or stop taking drugs, he or she might experience **withdrawal**, which refers to physical and mental symptoms that make it hard to function in daily life. Withdrawal symptoms can vary by substance. For example, symptoms of alcohol withdrawal include anxiety, tremors, insomnia, and increased heart rate. Symptoms of cocaine withdrawal include depression, fatigue, vivid nightmares, and increased appetite. If the teen takes more of the drug than he or she intended or realized, this could lead to an **overdose**. An overdose can cause life-threatening consequences or death.

Why are the risks from using alcohol and drugs greater for adolescents than for adults?

Although recreational drinking and drug use might be common in adults, youth are especially at risk for negative consequences when they start using at a young age. Here's why:

- ⇒ Since the teenage brain is still growing and changing, alcohol and drugs can cause more serious damage in teens than in adults. The most affected brain regions include the hippocampus (which is related to learning and memory) and the prefrontal cortex (responsible for critical thinking, planning, impulse control, and regulating emotions).
- ⇒ Drug and alcohol use interferes with many physiological processes and causes more unstable moods. Adolescent substance use is associated with higher rates of depression, aggression, violence, and suicide.
- ⇒ Because teens' decision-making abilities are not fully developed, they are more likely to engage in risky behavior and may further endanger themselves by engaging in risky situations such as drunk driving or walking in unsafe neighborhoods.
- ⇒ The younger an adolescent is when he or she starts drinking, the more likely he or she is to develop an alcohol problem.



What is the connection between trauma and substance abuse?

It's not uncommon for teens to use alcohol or drugs to cope with PTSD symptoms. Alcohol or drugs can at first seem to ease their distress. They can give teens pleasurable feelings or help them avoid the intense feelings that can follow stressful experiences. But in the long run, substance abuse can keep the teen in a cycle of avoidance and can make it more difficult to recover from trauma. In order to overcome the distress associated with trauma, teenagers will need help in learning better ways to cope that do not result in additional health and social problems.

Teenagers who already have a history of using substances are also more likely to participate in risky activities (such as driving under the influence or hanging out in unsafe neighborhoods), which can put them at risk of experiencing traumatic events (such as victimization and injury). Because of the many problems associated with alcohol and drug use, these teenagers may have a harder time being able to cope with traumatic events.

Regardless of whether teenagers experienced traumatic stress or substance abuse first, it is clear that these problems can be better understood together. The next few pages offer a few tips on how you can support your teen.

How can I help my teen deal with trauma?

Teenagers benefit from early intervention and ongoing parental support. If the trauma is recurring or has the potential to recur, talk with your teen about ways to minimize risk of future trauma. Remember, safety and both mental and physical health should be top priorities.

Here are some other ways you can support your child during this difficult time:

- ⇒ Some traumatic events can lead to fear, shame, and guilt. Encourage your teen to talk to you about the event, including the ways his or her life has been affected since the event happened and the ways that things have remained the same. To help your teen resolve feelings of guilt, discuss how to more accurately tell the difference between things he or she is responsible for and things he or she is not.
- ⇒ Adolescents exposed to trauma may feel self-conscious about their emotional reactions and worry about how these feelings make them different from their peers. Encourage your teen to openly express his or her feelings about the event to you. Be supportive and don't criticize.
- ⇒ Help your teen cope and work through feelings of unfairness, shame, guilt, anger, and revenge. Experiencing a traumatic event can cause a radical shift in the way a teen sees the world. Recognize that teens may "act out" or behave in self-destructive ways in an attempt to express their emotions. Helping your teen come up with constructive alternatives will lessen his or her feelings of helplessness.
- ⇒ Learn to recognize your teen's "triggers" or "reminders" of the traumatic event, as they may lead to a loss of emotional or behavioral control. Be there to offer support when he or she is reminded of the event and becomes upset.
- ⇒ If the event affected the whole family, discuss the possible strain on relationships. Each family member will experience the event in a different way and, therefore, have his or her personal reaction. Be honest about your own difficulty with the event and get help for yourself if necessary.

How can I help my teen stay drug-free?

⇒ Provide your teenager with encouragement and praise.

Let your teenager know that you have confidence in his or her ability to do things well, and that you're proud of him or her. Whenever your teen exhibits good behavior, praise him or her immediately.

⇒ Get into the habit of talking to your teenager every day.

In addition to talking about drugs and alcohol, it is important to talk to teens about what is going on in their lives. Ask your teen about things that are going well and things he or she might be having a hard time with.

⇒ Be a good role model.

Do not engage in illegal, unhealthy, or dangerous drug use. But, if you do use alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs, don't involve your children in your use. For example, don't ask your teen to grab you a beer out of the fridge.

⇒ Help your child get recommitted to school and the community.

Look for after-school activities your teen could get involved in. Communicate with his or her school board, principal, teachers, and counselors, and advocate for them to get the best education possible. Help your teenager realize that what he or she learns in school will be useful later in life.

⇒ Get involved in your teenager's life.

Take the time to be a part of the activities your teen is involved in by attending games and performances. Find at least one opportunity each week for you and your teen to do something special together. Use some of that time to talk to them about whether their friends use drugs or alcohol.

⇒ Make clear rules about what you expect and then enforce those rules.

Discuss why using drugs and alcohol is not acceptable in your family. Set your rules and expectations in advance because rules do not work after the fact. If a rule is broken, follow through with the consequences that you've established immediately and consistently. When your teenager does follow the rules, make sure to acknowledge it and praise him or her for it.

How can I get more help for my teen?

If you suspect that your son or daughter has experienced a traumatic event or may be using drugs or alcohol, be sure to talk to your teenager and seek support, and keep the following in mind:

Try to remain calm and be specific about your concerns. It can be helpful to express your love for your teen and that you feel worried, and that you want to listen to him or her. Let your teen know that you will be part of the solution and that you are there to offer help and support.

Seek support from the school and your community. Get in touch with teachers and school counselors to find out how your son or daughter is doing. Your teen's pediatrician, school counselor, or spiritual leader can help you identify mental health and substance abuse counselors and resources in your area.

Consult national databases. Look on the Internet for information on the subjects discussed in this pamphlet as well as for referrals to sources you can turn to in your own community.

Educate yourself by seeking out information from other reputable sources. See a partial list of resources on the next page.

Where can I find useful resources on the Internet?

For information about National Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment Centers:

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases>
<http://dasis3.samhsa.gov>

For additional information about trauma and substance abuse:

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp>
www.nida.nih.gov
www.NCTSN.net
www.bu.edu/atssa/

Additional information from sources used in this pamphlet:

www.family.samhsa.gov/get/treatment.aspx
www.adolescent-substance-abuse.com
www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm
www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/specific/fs_children.html
www.theantidrug.com
www.nationalyouth.com/substanceabuse.html

About the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic- and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

