# Drug Use among High School Students

## Presentation of the Issue

Drug abuse has become a common topic with each passing day due to its prevalence. People have become accustomed to seeing affected individuals and hearing the story, such that it is no longer something out of the ordinary. “The disease” has sunk its teeth deep into the flesh of many. The vice is no longer associated with only notorious criminals. Even the average churchgoer has slowly found themselves right in the thick of things. The surprising trend is that children of school going age are being used to smuggle drugs because of least suspicion by authorities. This is dangerous because even if they do not consume, they are exposed to the drugs at a very early age. It increases their curiosity of wanting to experiment once they attain a certain age that they feel they are mature. The most vulnerable age or stage of life is during adolescence. It is at this stage that most youths start experimenting with drugs. The lucky enough can stop it before it gets too far. However, to many, it marks the beginning of a new chapter in their lives. At school level, this mostly coincides with the high school stage of life.

High school students have been known to be very notorious when it comes to experimenting with drugs. When teenagers join high school, they do so as kids. However, the four years they are in school is a period of evolution. They leave as young adults and a lot goes on during that phase of transition. It is at this stage that puberty is at its climax and thus kids want to and pretend to be mature. Their definition of adult is however very lost which can’t be blamed on them since anyway; their minds are still immature. They try to experiment in all ways that portray adulthood among them substance abuse (The Recovery Village, n.d.). Hence, they should be carefully monitored at this stage of life, failure to which irreversible consequences may be suffered. The most significant cause for teenagers in high school to abuse drugs is out of peer pressure. At this stage of life, kids want to flow with the tide. They want to be like their friends. They want to appear cool (The Recovery Village, n.d.). Alcohol is the most abused drug among high school going, students. On the side of illegal stuff, marijuana is the most widely used. Each day, there are more than three thousand teenagers who try weed for the first time. Other substances widely used by high school students in the states include Amphetamines, Ritalin and Adderall (that students use to boost their performance), OxyContin, Salvia, tranquilizers, cough medicine otherwise known as prescription drugs, cocaine among many others. Those in the final year are the most susceptible.

Studies from as far as 1985 have depicted a worrying trend. A survey done back then showed that the general decline in the use of illicit drugs among high school students that had previously existed had come to a stop (Johnston, O'Malley & Bachman, 1986). This finding was not only limited to high school learners, but also to college students and young adults. A drug like cocaine saw an increase in its use. About seventeen percent of all high school seniors in the United States had tried cocaine by the year 1985 (Johnston, O'Malley & Bachman, 1986). The prevalence can perhaps be attributed to misinformed beliefs. A large percentage of the users believed that minimal use of the substance was not harmful (Casa Staff, 2012). Most of them, however, did not quit after high school as a study further up the age group ladder showed that the percentage increased to forty. Opiate use was also on the rise in 1985, though not by a significant margin as that of cocaine (Johnston, O'Malley & Bachman, 1986). Other drugs that had exhibited a decline before 1985 but upon the turn of the year that ceased to be the case were marijuana, inhalants, and tranquilizers. The opposite was the case with alcohol and stimulants, perhaps because the use and effects of the two were more visible leading to discouraged consumption. Generally, by 1985, substance abuse among high school students was on the decline, but there was cause for concern when it came to the drugs mentioned above. However, the rates stand out for the United States when compared with other developed nations.

The consumption of illegal drugs has reached alarming levels in the United States. In the year 2014 alone, 44.1 million Americans admitted to having used an illicit substance (Project know, n.d.). At the age of just thirteen years, seven percent had consumed something prohibited. Even the legal drugs such as alcohol had found their way to junior high school students as six percent of those aged twelve and thirteen confessed to having tried it (Project know, n.d.) A survey among high school students in the various states indicated worrying stats for binge drinking and marijuana use. The difference between the usage of the two was substantial in some countries but insignificant in others. These were the two most abused drugs among high school students, with proportions rising to thirty percent in some states (Project know, n.d.). The rates for cocaine are significantly lower but again the abuse of prescription drugs is overwhelmingly large. A more in-depth analysis of the abuse rates in the different states shows a probable reason for the vice and a possible remedy. Utah ranks the last in the category of Marijuana and binge, second last for cocaine and third last for prescription drugs. It can be attributed to the fact that majority of the state inhabitants are staunch Christians who are very vocal in their condemnation of drug use (Project know, n.d.). Religion is perhaps the key to lowering abuse rate not only among learners but across the general population.

In 2016, monitoring the future survey of drug use among eighth, tenth and twelveth graders indicated the lowest levels of substance abuse, except marijuana (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2016). Even though the percentage of eighth and tenth graders reporting daily use of cannabis has declined, one out of every sixteen high school seniors uses bhang every day, an unchanged figure from the past year (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2016). To show the seriousness of marijuana abuse among students in the United States, it even exceeded cigarette smoking in the past year. Use of tobacco and alcohol has continued to decline over the years. Teens also tend to agree more that cigarette consumption whether electronic or manual has harmful health repercussions (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2016).

When you look at the reasons youth give for indulging in drugs, some of them are so absurd. The answers vary from general to specific ones. Some just say that they do it just to feel better while some give a more precise response like to increase their self-confidence (Boys, Marsden & Strang, 2001). Some respondents also say that they use psychoactive substances to increase their rate of activity (Boys, Marsden & Strang, 2001). They want to do more work, and drugs create that psyche. Some high schoolers do it for confidence reasons (Sunrise House, n.d.). When not high on something, they cannot be able to socialize. A more stupid justification offered by some is that it enables them to stay up late into the night socializing. Amphetamines have been known to increase energy levels and keep people awake for long hours. Therefore, they are used as study drugs by students who want to achieve academic success (Sunrise House, n.d.). Others say that they consume drugs to relax after tough times or days (Boys, Marsden & Strang, 2001). Dwelling on the more important reasons, the first of its kind is peer pressure. The high school period coincides with the adolescent stage of life. This is the most vulnerable phase of life when it comes to peer pressure. To avoid humiliation and to ensure acceptance, kids are hardly able to say no to some things (Promises, 2013). Another cause for the prevalence of drugs in this age bracket is that they associate it with being mature. Adolescents want to feel more like adults than kids (Promises, 2013). Therefore, they try out things that make them have that feeling such as drinking and smoking. A bad example set by parents also influences the vice. Children who have grown up seeing their parents use drugs are likely to copy them (Promises, 2013). After all, parents help shape their kids’ behavior by how they behave. At the same time, the presence of the substances at home makes them more accessible to the kids. Curiosity is another factor (Promises, 2013). The desire to experiment and explore new things only gets stronger upon reaching adolescence. Idleness and boredom can quickly lead one astray. During holidays and weekends, it is very usual for students to find themselves passing their free time with some few beers or hanging out with pals and smoking some pot. Then comes self-medication. This is where teens just like most adults consume drugs to take away problems away from their lives, albeit temporary (Casa Staff, 2012). Alcohol, in particular, helps forget difficult emotions or situations, a much-needed escape from reality (Sunrise House, n.d.). Others use drugs as medication for shyness, to enable them to socialize with peers. Others do it to show their staunch parents that they are grown-ups and can do whatever they want with their lives, better termed as rebellion (Promises, 2013). Perhaps the most misguided notion is that of having fun (Promises, 2013). That feeling of being high is so enticing that teens just fall love in it, forgetting about the possible consequences, one of them being the addiction.

It was earlier thought that the primary reason school going children abused drugs was having fun. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that problems play a part (Casa Staff, 2012). It is therefore important for parents to diagnose the problems that their kids go through and try to salvage the situation. Stress may be a contributing factor as indicated by a recent survey (Casa Staff, 2012). About seventy-three percent said they took drugs to counter the stress and pressure associated with schoolwork. Social acceptance and self-esteem have been known to play a big role in shaping drug use among teens. The majority of them care about how others perceive them and hence may want to appear cool (Casa Staff, 2012). Thus they do what seems to be the most fashionable trend. There is also the false belief that trying out a drug once or twice is not harmful (New Beginnings, 2017). When drugs are readily available, the chance of having a go at them is always higher. This has been the case in the modern world where accessibility isn’t a big issue, especially for prescription drugs (Casa Staff, 2012).

There are some repercussions to using drugs not only among this age group but across the general population. People don’t just consume drugs and go to sleep. They do so and partake in other activities. As is well known, drugs cause misjudgments. It is for this reason that consumers cause most car accidents. One stat indicates that marijuana smokers are almost seven times more likely to crash their cars than non-smokers (The Recovery Village, n.d.). High-schoolers who do binge drinking are likely to suffer memory loss. This scenario is terrible for their academic life since they need this memory to remember things learned. Drug consumption leads to learning problems since it damages both short-term and long-term memory (Casa Staff, 2009). Excessive use of drugs leads to the brain working at a rate that is slower than usual. Depression sets in due to insufficient brain chemicals such as serotonin and dopamine (The Recovery Village, n.d.). Stunted growth is another physical abnormality that can result from excessive substance consumption (The Recovery Village, n.d.). Alcohol severely impairs Brain-related functions such as making sound decisions and judgments, motivation, reception of stimuli and impulses. Early consumption of liquor negatively implicates academic performance. This is because the brain does not fully develop until the mid-twenties, which is an age that most students haven’t achieved by the time they leave high school. Alcohol retards brain development, thus making it more dangerous for this class (Sunrise House, n.d.). It predisposes one to health complications and infections, mainly because drunkenness leads to irresponsible behavior. Abusing alcohol before one comes of age also increases the probability of addiction. Research carried out in 2014 by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health showed that about fifteen percent of adults who suffered from alcohol addiction began consumption before the age of fourteen compared to four percent for those who started after hitting eighteen (Sunrise House, n.d.). The same result for marijuana abuse. This shows that drug abuse when in high school is dangerous because it not only slows down brain development and memory retention, but it also increases the probability of addiction.

It is a common characteristic for those who begin taking drugs to experience a drop in grades. Interest in hobbies also diminishes. Close allies, family, and relatives get hurt if they get to know that their loved one is into drugs (iproject, n.d.). Insomnia which leaves one feeling fatigued during the day and especially during class work for students is another adverse effect (iProject, n.d.). Students who use psychoactive substances have a reputation for being rowdy and engaging in socially damaging behavior (iProject, n.d.). Emotional problems such as mood swings, depression, and anxiety are a common occurrence. It is very easy for suicidal thoughts to cross a high school student who uses drugs, especially if the going gets too tight with academic life (Casa Staff, 2009). High school is all about grades. And as previously mentioned, the brain develops up to the age of around twenty-five years, with any disruption to the regular cycle leading to problematic development. Neurotransmitters, the chemicals responsible for transmitting messages can have their routes altered by drugs, leading to information being conveyed in the wrong direction (just think twice, 2013). This leads to reduced understanding and hence failure for students. High rates of dropouts, absenteeism and bad grades among students have been associated with drug abuse.

## Application of Human Development Theories

There are several theories of human psychological development. These theories can explain why teens, adolescents or youths of high school going age are more prone to drug abuse and subsequently addiction. They are likely to portray this stage of life as one of seeking social acceptance. Freud’s stage of psychosexual development attributes the genital stage with people not only minding about their individual needs but also the welfare of others. This phase begins at puberty and sees individuals want to strike a balance between different areas of life, seem warmer and caring (Peningry, 2013). These various life areas may entail academics and social life. High Schoolers may want to have an experience away from academics, a life where they can make friends and be socially accepted. In doing this, they may end up being absorbed into drugs if their peers happen to be on that side of life. A more convincing theory of human development and one that is more widely used is that of Erik Erikson. It is based on ego strength or inadequacy through the various life stages. In Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development, the step that best describes high school kids is that of identity versus role confusion. At the age of twelve to eighteen years which coincidentally happens to be our age of interest, adolescents struggle with identity questions. They try different roles and explore different ideas in an attempt to find a fit for themselves (Lumen, n.d.). Those who make it at this stage stick to their values and beliefs regardless of what other people think. However, those who fail to discover themselves at this stage are some of those who end up getting caught in the drug muddle.

### Recommendations for Counselors

There are those whose profession is to counsel those that are directly or indirectly affected by drugs and help in the rehabilitation process. The consumers are the directly affected while their loved ones such as family and close friends are the indirectly affected. It, of course, hurts family members that one of them is too much into drugs, bearing in mind that the result may be damaging to the user’s life. For this reason, if I were the one doing the counseling, I would find an appropriate strategy to deal with victims and their families. I would be sensitive enough but at the same drive the point home. This implies possessing a particular set of knowledge, qualities or qualifications. The primary objective would be to help the client achieve abstinence (NIDA, 2017). After that, the secondary objective would be to reconstruct their lives after the damage that has been done by addiction (NIDA, 2017). Based on the cause of addiction, designing a treatment plan for each patient would be necessary (Allpsychologyschools, n.d.). It wouldn’t be right to use a generalized treatment plan since the patients might not all be suffering from addiction of the same substance, or the extent of damage may be different.

A drug counselor might choose to use a combination of several therapies in an individual’s treatment plan. The most effective therapies include motivational interviewing which makes the clients realize that change needs to be made and that they should quit their behavior (Drugabuse.com, n.d.). Contingency management can be done to reward progress and punish regression or non-compliance by the client. Cognitive behavioral therapy teaches customers to cope without drugs. The counselor teaches the patients other strategies to deal with emotions and stress other than drugs (Drugabuse.com, n.d.). Then we have family therapy, where the counselor helps the client deal with family issues and pressures and also involves close relatives and family members. It is necessary for a counselor to consider and be well equipped with implementing these therapies. The therapies designed work appropriately and effectively for all individuals irrespective of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or class.

A counselor should make sure that they have excellent interpersonal skills and excellent communication skills. Patience is a virtue they should uphold, since underage abusers such as high school kids may show some bit of resistance or hesitation. They should also train themselves critically of possible solutions to the problems faced (Allpsychologyschools, n.d.). High school kids may have causal reasons for them to engage in drugs. A counselor should not only suggest ways of quitting the vice but think critically of solutions facing the youths. The consultant should always maintain a professional relationship between them and the patients, ensuring that integrity is maintained by providing beneficial services (NAADAC, n.d.). The expert should be supportive of actions that will lead to a better quality of life and independence for the clients (NAADAC, n.d.). If the counselor cannot be able to deal with a client based on the complexity of the issue, then they should direct them to other professionals who they think can handle the task at hand (NAADAC, n.d.). Those seeking the help of counselors should look for counselors who possess such skills.

As much as secondary school students think that they are having fun when they consume drugs, they should be aware that it increases their vulnerability to accidents, misguided actions, and even death. They should not seek drugs as the solution to the problems in their lives. Instead, they should pursue the help of professionals.

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