

## Disease Concept

Any illicit drug use by teenagers is unhealthful, illegal, and potentially very dangerous. But the kind of drug abuse about which we are most deeply concerned is that which leads to chemical dependence. Many teenagers have experimented with alcohol, marijuana, inhalants, and even other drugs. They have rejected them as an important part of their lives, and have pursued worthwhile academic, vocational, and social goals. Others have seriously damaged or even destroyed their lives and that of their families because of their drug use. It is these kids that tonight's rap is about.

This kind of drug abuse that leads to chemical dependence is a disease. It is not a moral defect, it is not caused by aversive life events, and we do not believe that it occurs because of what a parent has or has not done. Let us explore what we mean when we say disease.

Drug abuse is a disease, not a symptom of some other problem. It is primary. In the past, and unfortunately even in the present, some physicians and some mental health professionals have believed that if they treated the underlying problem of the adolescent, he or she would stop using drugs. This approach was a total failure. As long as an adolescent is using drugs, no treatment for other issues is effective or even possible. Most frequently, drug abuse is the cause and not the result of the other problems. In any event, it must be treated first. This is the treatment approach of Kids Helping Kids.

Secondly, drug abuse is chronic. That means that it can be treated but not cured. Like diabetes, it can be treated by pursuing a certain healthful way of living specifically designed for this disease. The disease is then arrested, not cured. If the healthful life style is abandoned, the symptoms will quickly return.

Next, drug abuse is progressive. For teenagers who are on the way to chemical dependence, increasing amounts of drugs will, indeed must, be used to achieve the same effect. This is called tolerance. Therefore, the kid uses more and more drugs, and often a greater variety of drugs, just to get the same feeling. The effects of increased drug use are predictable and orderly.

Finally, drug abuse is terminal. When drugs are used in greater amounts with increasing frequency, the result is death. The age range between 15 and 24 is the only age group in the United States for which the life expectancy has gone down. This is due to a high death rate from accidents, suicide, and homicide. These are often drug related. Adults who use large amounts of drugs for long periods of time generally die from the same causes as adolescents or from physical disorders such as liver disease, heart attacks, strokes, and others.

An important term to understand is "chemical dependence." A person is chemically dependent if he or she continues to use drugs in increasing amounts and frequency in spite of the many negative consequences which drug use causes.

In the beginning of a kids druggie career, drug use is a matter of personal choice. The kid decided to try drugs, usually after being urged to do so by a peer who offered the drugs. The kid may have refused several times but finally gave in.

No one made him. Certainly not the parent. An important part of treatment is to hold the kid responsible for the choices he or she made.

Chemical dependence is a disease of the body, the thinking process, and the feelings. Drugs interfere with the body's ability to use the food that is eaten. They also poison body organs including the brain. Chemically dependent people often do not eat a healthful diet or sleep regular hours. Because the brain is effected, they do not comprehend the connection between the bad things that happen to them and their drug use. The use of mood altering drugs severely disturbs normal feelings and emotions.

The progress of the disease can be clearly seen if we observe the feeling part of it. We see that the chemically dependent kid goes through four stages.

1. Learning the Mood Swing. In this stage the kid learns that drug use causes good feelings. Use is almost accidental. Friends have offered drugs and the kid has accepted the offer to use them. Use is unplanned and occasional. There are no behavioral changes.

2. Seeking the Mood Swing. Because of the rewarding nature of the good feelings (highs) that the kid gets from drugs, he begins to seek out drugs to experience the high again. He begins to get and use drugs on a planned basis. The increased use may begin the process of tolerance. Toward the end of this stage, the variety of drugs the kid uses increases. Pills, cocaine, crack, hash oil and others may be used. Behavioral changes begin to occur: New friends who never come to the house, different clothing, druggie slang, stealing from the family to support the drug habit, staying away all night without permission, breaking curfew, and becoming easily angry or even belligerent. Hobbies and favorite activities are abandoned and grades drop. The kid is leading two separate lives. To his parents and other adults, he or she is denying drug use. Away from adult observation, he or she is developing a druggie life style. Drug use has changes from a choice to a compulsion. When he comes down from his high, he crashes. This causes pain. When he is not high, he has to face the destructive course his life is taking. In order to avoid this pain, he self medicates. In the mean time, he is not learning the coping skills which other kids learn.

Stage 3. Preoccupation with the Mood Swing. By this time drug use is almost daily, or at least as often as the kid can get drugs. Tolerance has increased. It takes a lot of drugs to have an effect. The kid often tries to cut down but finds that it is not possible. Overdoses, flashbacks, and blackouts occur. She lives openly as a druggie, even admitting it to her parents. The guilt and shame caused by the deterioration and immorality of her life are intense. Self-esteem decreases to the point of suicidal ideation or even actual attempts. The highs from drug use become lower and lower; the pain from the crash greater and greater.

Stage 4. Using to Feel Normal. At this stage, the kid uses drugs just to feel normal. If he is not on drugs he is in pain and unable to function. Pain is chronic. Suicide attempts are frequent. His life is centered around obtaining and using drugs. He does not function in any productive way; at school, work, or socially. He is burned out.