

Not My Student?!

Helping the Student Caught in Drug and Alcohol Abuse

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Recognition

The first step in the process of helping students face the battle of drug and alcohol abuse is to attempt to recognize the problem. Here we need to establish the difference between “Drug and Alcohol Use” and “Drug and Alcohol Abuse.” The use of illegal drugs and alcohol is dangerously high these days. A study from the Partnership for a Drug-Free America gave the statistic that 76% of students in their senior year of High School have tried alcohol at some point. In 2003, there were an estimated 23.6 million teens in America in grades seven through 12. Of those 23.6 million, 10.8 million had tried illegal drugs ranging from marijuana to ecstasy to prescription drugs.

So what takes someone who has used alcohol and drugs and leads them into a situation of abuse? Here are a few warning signs to look for in a student suffering from drug abuse:

- Withdrawing or keeping secrets from friends or family.
- Losing interest in activities that used to be important.
- Performing differently in school (such as grades dropping and frequent absences)
- Relying on drugs or alcohol to have fun, forget problems, or relax
- Lying, stealing, or selling off possessions to obtain money for the purchase of drugs or alcohol.

When and if you see these behaviors in your student, it can be a very uneasy time. What do they mean? What if it is just a coincidence and I’m reading too much into it? What if I’m wrong? These are all fair questions to be asking. What we then want to do is try and look at the back story and see if what is happening in the student’s life matches up with the signs for drug and alcohol abuse.

Reasons

When teenagers are abusing themselves with drugs and alcohol, there is a reason for it. Remember, we are looking at abuse and not just use of drugs and alcohol. By the time it gets to this stage, we are looking beyond just peer pressure and trying to fit in (even though that might have played a role in getting to this point). Some of the major reasons that students find themselves in these situations are:

- **Trouble at Home**
This could be constant fighting with a parent or sibling, a recent divorce, or anything that throws off the balance of the student’s home life. Many times when a student acts out in their personal life, it is a reflection of something going on in their home life.
- **Recent Traumatic Event**
When someone turns to drugs and alcohol it can be a coping mechanism for something painful that has occurred to the student. A death in the family, a falling out of an important relationship, or any number of different hurtful experiences could send the student into a downward spiral.
- **Loss of Control**
Going all the way back to Adam and Eve, people have been trying to obtain control. Why should teenagers be any different? When the idea of control is ripped away from someone, this can be a catalyst for abuse. When an injustice takes place or something negative outside of the student’s control, they might turn to drugs and alcohol as a way of trying to control the chaos. If they are going to be hurt or harmed, it will be on their terms and not the world’s.

If you see some of the warning signs that we discussed before, and they match up with some of the reasons listed above being played out in a student’s life, it is our responsibility as someone who cares for their well-being to confront them.

Facing the Issue

Confronting the student begins months, if not years, before the problem even exists. We need to make sure we are constantly building up relationships with our students because in instances like this, we need to have earned the right to be heard. We have to remember, this student is hurting deeply and will be hesitant to open up to someone they are not sure of. Make sure the student knows that you have their best interest at heart. Here are a few tips for confronting the issue with a student:

- **Come in Love**

It will not work to condemn the student right off the bat (even though you might really want to). This student is struggling and suffering and to get them out of this hole that they have dug, they will need a lot of love and support. Make sure they know that you are a person who cares for them and wants to help them out.

- **Help Them Realize the Problem**

There may be a situation like I experienced when a student comes to you already knowing they have a problem. Most of the time, we are not so lucky. A student is not going to want to seek help for something they don't feel is wrong. Point out what they have been doing or experiencing and lay it out in a simple way. Help them realize that their grades have slipped, they have lost friends, and are no longer involved in the extracurricular activities they once loved. Remember to make known your observations of what is happening and not judgments.

- **Work with Other Adults**

You cannot be a one man or one woman show on this. You will need to work with the parents, family members, teachers, and any other important adult figure in the student's life. This may be difficult because one of them might in fact be a contributing factor to the abuse. If that's the case, there is some work that will need to be done on that end to create an appropriate environment for the student to recover in.

- **Consult the Experts**

If we are talking about a student who has fallen into abuse of drugs and alcohol, you will need the help of experts in the area. Doctors, counselors, an AA or NA group in the area, or any other expert in the field can be found and would be an amazing resource. You will not have all the answers, but this does not mean you are not able to find someone who does. Your church should be able to connect you with experts in the area.

- **Check In**

This is going to be a process. One talk, no matter how well it goes, is not going to fix the problem. You need to make sure you are committed to seeing the student all the way through. Check in frequently. This does not mean having conversations about their drugs and alcohol abuse every day, but check in on they are doing in school, in relationships, at home, etc.

- **Pray**

Pray for the student constantly. Pray with the student even more. Help them to realize the power of prayer. Also do not forget to be lifting up the family and support system for the student. They will be needing an extra dose of strength as well.

Don't Wait for it to Happen Again - Talk About Drugs and Alcohol in Your Group

Does your group talk about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. So many times we assume the kids hear it elsewhere or that our kids do not fit the profile of a student who would drink or use drugs. Prepare your students by talking about it openly and honestly in your group so that when they are tempted, they are ready.

For Your Personal Prayer and Meditation

Read through the story of the Temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11. The devil tries three different times to get Jesus to give in but our Lord was able to stay strong and resist those temptations. I wish I could be that strong. I especially wish our students could be that strong. We are all going to fall short. But no matter what we have done in the past, when we get to a point where we want to turn away from our temptations and focus on the things of the Lord we find a promise in verse 11 that will help us face anything. When Jesus was done fighting off the devil, it says that "angels came and attended him." Help the students see that when they fight this difficult and painful fight, and are finally able to win with the help of our Lord, He will help bring that student who was once beaten down and exhausted back to full strength in Him.

Heavenly Father,

We lift up all of the students in our midst who are struggling with addiction. We pray that you make your grace known to them and shower them with your love. We pray that you strengthen us to be a support to them. Grant us the wisdom and discernment in these times so that we might hold up our students in this difficult time. All of this is prayed in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.