

A Youth Pastor's Perspective

**HOW TO
COUNSEL TEENS
WITH DRUG AND
ALCOHOL PROBLEMS**

A photograph showing a person's hand holding a syringe filled with a dark liquid, likely blood or a drug, over a wooden surface. The syringe is positioned horizontally, and the hand is holding it from the back. The background is dark and out of focus.

Dan Britton

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How bad is the Problem?

Every Friday night as a teen I had a different story to tell my parents about where I was going. It usually included places like the bowling alley, the pizza place, a pool party or a concert. The big question is “Were you ever there?” Absolutely not! I was out partying, drinking, dealing drugs and doing what I thought was the cool thing to do. In my mind I was gaining popularity, honor, and respect, but all I gained was a dead friend, near death experiences, and a damaged lung.

Today it’s proven that the number one cause of teenage deaths in the U.S is texting and driving. Does that mean drugs and alcohol are no longer an issue? Not even close. A decade ago the number one teen killer was alcohol-related car accidents, and it’s still in the top three to this day. This topic is something that nobody enjoys talking about. It’s clear that teens and parents are aware that substance abuse is still a huge problem.

Adolescents are consuming more substances than we can imagine. The actual number of teens using drugs and alcohol is the largest it’s ever been. We’ve all heard stories of teens overdosing, driving drunk, and abusing themselves or others because of the power and influence drugs have on their lives.

The heart of this book is what will burden my heart forever, the ongoing pressure and devastating effects teens face with drug and alcohol abuse. The following information will help youth leaders, mentors, parents and counselors make an impact in the ongoing battle.

Understanding why teens turn to drugs and alcohol

When counseling students at risk of drug and alcohol abuse, it's important to know why teens are using and what the signs and symptoms are that indicate a potential problem in this area.

Parents and other authority figures often miss the early indicators of substance abuse. It is easy to dismiss certain symptoms as normal teenage behavior. And dismissing the signs lets adults "off the hook" from needing to have some very difficult conversations with teenagers who don't want to have them. This behavior is further justified by the fact that all of the signs of substance abuse can have other, more harmless explanations.

This is exactly what it is so important to watch for these indicators and not to ignore them. Sometimes a single conversation or some extra attention can stop "I only tried it a few times" from blossoming into full blown addiction. It is better to err on the side of caution rather than ignoring the signs until the problem has worsened into something much more difficult to deal with.

Warning Signs

Here is a list of the most common warning signs of drug or alcohol abuse.

- Loss of interest in hobbies or social activities.

If a teen quickly loses interest in their favorite activities such as sports, hobbies, or social gatherings, it could be a strong warning sign. Look out for phrases such as "I don't like that anymore" or "I don't have time for that." The less they are willing to talk about it or explain their reasoning for the change in priorities, the more likely there is to be a problem.

- Changes in friends.

Drugs and alcohol are a common reason for changes in social groups among teenagers. Users may become uncomfortable or disinterested in spending time with non-users. They also might begin to spend time in different places. If a teen chooses to spend time with other teens who also show warning signs for substance abuse, that is a good indicator that they may be using.

- Unexplained need for money.

It is common for teenagers to ask for money, but the way in which they ask for it can give you information on whether they might be using it for drugs. Teens who need money for drugs will often ask their parents for money without explaining what it will be used for. Or they will inflate the prices of things they need and then spend the extra money on drugs. They may also insist on being given the money to buy things for themselves rather than allowing their parents to buy them. This is a strong indicator that they are lying about how they will use this money.

- Changes in appetite, sleep, or personal hygiene.

Both an increase and decrease in a teen's appetite or the amount they sleep could indicate substance abuse. Some drugs make teens want to sleep or eat more, and some reduce the desire for food and rest dramatically. Any sudden gain or loss in weight or change in energy level should be noted. Likewise, teens often begin to neglect their physical appearance as their dependence increases. They might stop brushing their teeth or hair, putting on their makeup, carefully choosing their clothing, or even bathing or showering altogether.

- Sudden changes in mood.

Adolescence is a time of change, so changes in mood are to be expected. However, there are certain clues that the problem may be drug related rather than just a matter of hormones. The most telling sign is if a teen suffers from sudden and dramatic mood swings. They might also become unusually irritable, fidgety or anxious. Any strong change in temperament or personality that happens within a short span of time is a good indicator that something might be wrong.

- A drop in academic performance

As substance abuse increases, priorities change. Grades are often one of the first priorities to fall by the wayside. Others include the neglect of other responsibilities. Teens who use drugs may stop doing their homework, taking out the trash when they are supposed to, or attending family, school, or church functions. The more quickly this happens, and the greater the change from their previous behavior, the

stronger the warning sign.

- An increase in secrecy or paranoia.

It is a cliché that teenagers lie to their parents and other authority figures, but it may also be a sign of substance abuse. They will start to lie frequently about where they have been, what they have been doing, or who they are spending time with. Or they will refuse to speak of these matters at all. Often they will engage in paranoid behaviors such as refusing to let anyone into their room or touch their bags or any objects they carry around with them.

- Physical symptoms.

Different drugs cause different symptoms, but the following could be indicators of substance abuse: loss of motor control and coordination, bloodshot eyes, slurred speech, or coughing or nausea that lasts longer than you would expect from an illness.

Even one or two of these signs might mean it is time for parents to sit their teens down for a conversation, or take further action. The sooner a teen gets help, the more likely it is to prevent the problem from turning serious, and the easier it is to assist them in getting to the root of the problem that led them to substance abuse in the first place. Many of these warning signs are also indicators of possible depression or other mental health issues. Even if the teen in question isn't using drugs, these signs are strong evidence that they probably do need some kind of help.

Approaching Teens About Substance Abuse

It isn't easy to talk to a teen about substance abuse. Parents and counselors alike are often afraid that they will say the wrong things and shut the teen down or make them defensive and resentful. But talking to a teen as soon as you notice the warning signs for substance abuse is the single most important step you can take to help them.

The following strategies, gleaned from several experts in the field, will help to ensure that your communication is as effective as possible in getting the teen to open up and get the help they need.

Choose the right time to talk

Pick a time when the teen is not busy or under particular stress. If they have a test to study for or a big game the next day, they will have difficulty focusing on the discussion. It is best to talk when the teen is in a calm and even mood, although this may not be possible.

The most important factor is that, unless you have no other choice, you should never try to discuss substance abuse with a teen while they are under the influence. Wait for them to sober up and then speak with them. Parents in particular sometimes make this mistake when signs of inebriation cause them to panic. However, it is very unlikely a discussion with an inebriated teenager will achieve any results.

The right attitude

Clear, direct, and calm is the correct attitude to take when confronting a teen about substance abuse. Many parents and counselors dance around the issue at hand for fear of pushing the teen away or making them defensive. However, being subtle or indirect makes it difficult to broach the subject in a meaningful way, and it leaves room for the teen to steer the conversation away from substance abuse. Instead, state your evidence and concerns clearly and directly. It helps to write the specific warning signs you have observed in the teen down in advance, so you can bring them up. This also helps to keep the discussion focused and on target.

It is equally important that these statements are delivered in a calm manner with an emphasis that your interest is in supporting and helping the teen, rather than punishing them. Make statements of fact, not accusations. Leave your emotions at the door. This includes panic and fear as well as aggression. This can be particularly difficult for parents who have such a strong emotional investment. However, emotion-fueled accusations will make teens defensive, and more likely to lie or shut down. If you can create a safe and accepting space, they will find it easier to open up.

Dealing with deception

When someone has a substance abuse problem, lying can become second nature. Teens will often tell well-rehearsed and convincing lies in an attempt to hide their behavior from adults. Parents can be easily fooled because they do not wish to believe their child has a problem. It is important to go into a discussion with a teen about substance abuse with the attitude that the potential problem is probably real, and they will most likely lie about it. Trust your instincts. If you think something is wrong you will be right most of the time.

That does not mean you should be accusatory. But it does mean you should counter excuses or explanations a teen gives with observations and counter-evidence. Be on the watch for common excuses. It is rare for teens to go to drinking parties without drinking. If you smell marijuana or cigarettes on their clothes, you can be confident they were not merely "hanging around people who were smoking." Make it clear that you will not believe or tolerate lies and excuses, and they are more likely to stop.

At the same time, make it clear that you do not take deception personally, and that it will be forgiven as soon as they start to tell the truth. Often when teens start to lie, they are afraid to admit they lied even when it becomes obvious. Tell them you realize they are not telling the truth, but that you understand and are not judging them for it. Teens, especially those who use drugs, are not often consequence-oriented thinkers. They might lie even when they know you will see right through them.

Always keep in mind that you are dealing with someone going through a difficult situation. They may change their story or get angry and defensive while you are speaking to them. These are emotional reactions, but they may also strategies they will use to derail you and avoid coming clean. It is your responsibility to stay calm and focused and guide them toward telling the truth and talking about their problems.

Have a treatment plan in advance

It is vital to have a treatment facility or professional chosen before you begin the conversation. You may speak to the teen with the belief that they have just begun to experiment with drugs or alcohol, only to find that they are already deeply addicted and have been for some time. Some teens are much better at hiding the signs than others. For both parents and counselors, this can be a shock. Having a treatment plan in place helps to take the worry out of what to do next.

It can also provide great comfort to a teen who has decided to accept help for a serious problem. The more knowledge and solutions you have going into the conversation, the more confident and self-assured you will be, and the more you will be able to give the teen the help they need.

How a Counselor Can Help Troubled Teens

The role of the volunteer counselor or mentor in the case of teen substance abuse is different from that of a therapist or a certified and licensed substance abuse counselor. It is not your job to provide the treatment a teen needs for their drug problem. Instead, your role is to be there when teens need someone to talk to, to figure out whether they need help from a professional, and to make it as easy as possible for them to get that help. Let's discuss these steps in more detail.

Determine if They Need Treatment

The first step in helping a teen with their drug or alcohol problems is to figure out if they indeed have a problem. The sad truth is that, more often than not, if you believe a teen is using drugs, they probably are. We spoke in other sections of how to identify the warning signs of substance abuse and how best to approach a teen about their drug problem. As a counselor, you are in a unique position to help teens who might otherwise have difficulty finding help.

Many teens find it easier to talk to a neutral third party than to go directly to their parents or guardians. Make it known that you are only interested in listening and helping and that when they speak to you there will be no judgment. There is a large range of situations in teen drug use. Studies have shown that talking to a teen in the early stages when they are thinking of trying drugs, or have only done so a few times, can dramatically reduce the likelihood of addiction.

If you are knowledgeable, supportive, and make others feel safe, it is more likely that teens will talk to you, and you can more easily determine whether their problem is serious enough that they need professional treatment.

Convince Them They Need Treatment

Therapists and rehabilitation centers only help if the person in need shows up. Fortunately, if a teen is under 18 years of age, they cannot refuse treatment if their parent or guardian decides they need it. If they are over 18, it might require a push from a school administrator, employer, or the legal system. As a counselor, you cannot compel a teen to receive treatment. If you determine that treatment is necessary and the teen refuses, you should immediately inform their parents or guardians so they can take the next step.

That being said, it is better to convince the teen they need treatment if at all possible. It will make the transition process smoother and more likely to be effective if everyone involved agrees. It can be difficult to get any teenager to do something they don't want to do, and the problem is much worse with addicts. However, there are strategies you can use that have proven effective.

Get the teen to talk about the problems drugs or alcohol have caused in their lives. Even if they claim they are fully functional and have no interest in getting clean, if you probe deeply enough you will often find they are fully aware of negative effects of their drug use. They just try not to think about it. Ask them to describe an event in which their drug use made a situation worse or hurt them or someone else. Ask them about what they have lost or given up for drugs. Even if they claim they don't care about any of this, telling someone else about these issues will bring them into the forefront of their mind and perhaps help them see the situation differently.

Try to find the root of the problem. Research shows that as many as 75% of teens who use drugs suffer from mental health issues such as anxiety or depression. The drugs seem like an easy cure. Help them to see that there are other, better ways to deal with their problems, and they may be more amenable to the idea of getting sober.

Help them see the potential consequences of their substance abuse. Ask them about their life goals and what they want to do in the future. Talk about the way that drugs and alcohol can interrupt these goals. Let them do as much of the talking as possible. If a counselor or parent lectures a troubled teen, they are likely to shut down or dismiss what they hear. If they come to the conclusions themselves, they will be more convincing and powerful.

Suggest easing them into treatment. Teens might be more open to the idea of speaking to a therapist or certified substance abuse counselor than to going straight into a rehabilitation center. These professionals are trained to help teens overcome reluctance and denial and to determine and work on the underlying causes that lead to the substance abuse.

How to Direct Them to Get Help

The specifics of getting teens into treatment will vary based on your area and the exact situation. This is why it is vital to familiarize yourself with these factors in advance. Counselors should be fully knowledgeable and up-to-date on all treatment options in their areas. Find out all you can about local therapists, social workers, certified counselors, rehabilitation programs, and treatment centers. Determine who offers the best treatment and what their specialties are.

If you can, develop a relationship with as many of these people and institutions as possible. Call them up and tell them who you are and what you do. More often than not, they will be happy to talk to you and offer you practical and legal advice on what you should and should not do in your counseling. Different teens with different problems often require different types of treatment, so it's important to know what the options are. Once you get this information, keep it organized and always on hand.

Going into treatment can be a difficult and emotional time for both affected teens and their families. There is often a great deal of paperwork to fill out and legal hoops to jump through. This is where a counselor can provide both great comfort and invaluable practical assistance. If you are familiar with the process, it takes some of the burden off of the parents during a highly stressful situation. And if you already have a relationship with the therapist or treatment center in question, it can smooth the process even further.

Counseling Guidelines to Consider

When dealing with teens that have drug and alcohol problems it's vital to have some clear guidelines when counseling them. That is why it's good to let them know what's expected of them.

- *What is the timing and frequency expected of the counseling sessions?

- *What are the goals of the counseling?

- *What are specifics they need to know about the process?

The counselee needs to know that they can talk about themselves openly and honestly. The counselor must have a humble and loving attitude towards the counselee.

It is easier to confront an issue on a teen when they feel comfortable with the counselor.

If dealing with a minor, they need to understand that their parents must be involved in the process of change. Basically they need to hear that you plan on telling their parents if the issue involves anyone getting hurt.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) survey reported the following information about parental involvement. "The reality of a growing adolescent drug problem should serve as a wake-up call to every all parents who are tempted to say, ;'It will never happen to us.' Every one of our children will be faced with a decision about drugs and alcohol. Parents play the most significant role in helping children make those decisions. Parents, who set a good example, talk openly about drugs, and who live and teach biblical theologies of substance abuse are more likely to raise children who won't become statistics."

Support to Parents during Teen Substance Abuse

Teen substance abuse can be just as difficult on parents as it is on the teens themselves. Oftentimes parents have no one to turn to when they discover their teen is an addict and they try to take on the entire burden themselves. As a counselor, helping parents through this difficult time is one of your most important roles.

Here are a few ways you can support the parents of teens with drug and alcohol problems and make a substantial difference in their lives.

Provide someone else for the teen to talk to

Parents may find it very difficult to talk to their teens about their substance abuse. It is important that the person who confronts a teen about their drug problem is clear, direct, and calm. This means approaching the situation with a clear head, free of rampant emotions. It is understandable that this is very hard for parents.

In our society, we have an image that parents are supposed to be role models and guiding lights for their children. But parents are people, too. They aren't perfect, and they shouldn't have to be. When parents find out their children are using drugs, they often feel angry, hurt, or betrayed. Even if they believe they have these feelings under control, they might flare up when they try to actually sit their teen down to talk. What should be a supportive and controlled conversation transforms into a fight, an angry lecture, or a bevy of accusations. None of these are likely to get through to the troubled teen and can create alienation and make the problem even worse.

When parents face this problem, a counselor can be of enormous help. Let parents know that you are willing to talk to their teen if they might not be able to handle it calmly or if they have tried already and feel they are not making progress. This can either be done in private with just you and the teen or you can offer to serve as a mediator. As a mediator, you would sit down with both the teen and one or more parents and serve to keep the conversation calm, focused, and moving forward.

Help them keep things in perspective

It is one thing to hear statistics or watch news stories on teen drug abuse. It is another thing entirely to find out your teen is an addict. For many parents this revelation is shocking and terrifying. They jump to the worst possible conclusions and assume the worst possible outcomes. Their child's future is finished. The drugs have permanently damaged their brain. Their teen is a criminal and is going to wind up in jail. This effect is worsened by the fact that many parents are afraid to tell anyone outside the family about the problem. Because it hits so close to home, parents lose the ability to look at the situation objectively.

This is a situation where a counselor can be a lifesaver. You can sit parents down and help them regain perspective. Tell them about treatment options and how effective they can be. Give them the facts about the long-term effects of specific drugs on the brain and how good the human body is at recovering. Discuss each of their concerns and give them examples -- from personal experience, if you have them, otherwise from your own research -- of families who underwent similar crises and came through them intact. Many teens recover from addiction and go on to lead happy, successful, normal lives. Parents may understand this intellectually, but it will mean a whole lot more coming from you.

Make sure they understand the limitations of your role

Parents may come to rely on counselors as the single solution to their teen's substance abuse problems. If you have had success in getting through to teens and helping them get treatment, parents may begin to treat you as they would a therapist or certified counselor.

Make sure they know that you are not trained or authorized to provide this level of treatment. Impress upon them whenever needed that your role is that of a friend and mentor, not a professional in substance abuse. You are there to give them advice and guide them on to more serious treatment if they decide it is needed.

Help them with paperwork and day to day tasks

Often times it is the small, practical things that make all the difference. Parents get overwhelmed by the fact of their teen's substance abuse. Too much stress makes it difficult to perform even simple tasks. When getting a child into treatment, the tasks pile up, and so does the stress.

If you can step in and help them with the process of filling out forms and making phone calls, it can ease the burden and let parents focus on dealing with their lives and providing emotional support to their teens. Let parents know that if they don't have to do everything themselves. You may only be able to provide a limited amount of support, because you are only one person. But that does not mean that parents have to go through this alone.

Many families don't want to tell anyone their teen has substance abuse problems out of fear or shame. They do not want to be judged or ostracized. But if they are willing to open up to their family, friends, and community, they may be amazed at how much support they receive.

When people are ill, their community and loved ones bring them food, offer them rides to the doctor, and provide them with many other kinds of support. Addiction is an illness and it can be just as hard on a family as any other illness. Parents may need some coaxing from you to open up, but you can coach them that most of the time, fear is an illusion. If they can overcome it, it will give the important people in their lives the chance to show how accepting and supportive they can be.

Unfortunately, the sad truth is that in some cases, these fears are justified. Some families don't have strong support structures or have jobs and community positions that could be threatened if they reveal their teen's drug problem. In these cases your role becomes even more important. If your role as counselor is part of a church, school, or teen or community center, start a teen support fund to help families during periods of addiction.

Get people to donate food or other goods, no questions asked, that can be given to families that need them. In many cases, the parents and families that need help the most are the ones who are least able to get it for themselves. As a counselor, you can be there for them when no one else is.

Substance abuse in evangelical Christianity

“Alcohol and drug addiction is more than physical dependence; it’s bondage of the soul, the mind and the body. (Grace Track 2006)”

Substance abuse is undoubtedly viewed as a sin in the Christian church. The Christian community believes that in order for any treatment to be effective, the teachings of Jesus Christ need to be included.

In reality the 12 step program is founded on Christian doctrine. Seeking God is a key element. No alcohol or drug addict can recover without turning his or her life over to God. The bottom line is that God needs to be involved in the recovery process.

The conflict is between what the bible says is right and the sinful behavior of addiction that we know to be wrong but cannot seem to control. Christian drug treatment is about releasing the grip of addiction and renewing faith in God and the true meaning of life.

When dealing with the issue of drug and alcohol addiction there are many verses in the bible I point teens to. These verses alone are not used to put judgment or guilt on a teen, but used to point out the effects of abuse. Those effects are clearly stated in Proverbs 20:1(NLT) “Wine produces mockers; alcohol leads to brawls. Those led astray by drink cannot be wise.” This passage doesn’t completely prohibit drinking but does imply the direction we are led by being under the influence of such substances.

Ephesians 5:18 allows a transition for what God actually wants us to do instead of getting drunk, “be filled with the Spirit.” Paul points believers to the alternative which is found in the filling of the Spirit. To be honest, I sometimes feel led to tell students that they will never feel any more thrill or life altering experience than through the activity of the Spirit in their lives.

In addition to these verses, I turn them to the truth that God calls us to be obedient to him. Therefore, another direction that is completely appropriate when dealing with the sin of addiction is obedience to the will of the Father. I Peter 1:14(NLT) says “Obey God because you are his children.”

That same passage talks about not conforming to the evil desires we once had, which is similar to what Paul is saying in Romans 12:1-2 “present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of you mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (NKJV)”

Conforming to the world leads to corrupting behavior, and loss of self-control. In 1 Peter 2:11 we are reminded to look at the eternal perspective in all things on this earth, and to “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.” I also tell them to run from the temptation when they are faced with it. II Timothy 2:22a (NLT), “Run from anything that stimulates youthful lust...”

Lastly, in response to leaders, it’s important never to neglect our role, which is to guide others towards repentance from addictions and to seek professional help.

Galatians 6:1(NLT) “Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.”

Leaders need to also be aware of their own actions in and around those they are serving. The apostle Paul

in Romans 14:21 tells us that we are to avoid doing things if it causes our brother to "stumble" or "is offended or is made weak," even if our conscience is okay on the matter.

A Youth Pastor's Perspective on Substance Abuse

The issue of drug and alcohol abuse has influenced my own development through the years. Experiencing a lifestyle of drug and alcohol abuse while simultaneously growing up in the church, I have an idea about how to deal with the issue in the context of ministry.

It's extremely important that the church youth ministry provide alternatives for teens through relational programs. What drew me to church wasn't the event itself but the relationships I was able to make in the midst of those times. I can remember the leaders who spent time with me and showed me that they cared for me. Students are looking for a place to belong, and the sad truth is that the drug and alcohol scene is very accepting. I strongly believe youth ministries should be more accepting than any drug infested gathering. One helpful tip is to bring in volunteers who have struggled in this area so they can share their experiences of Christ bringing them out of it.

I also think it's key to have resources available to help them deal with addictions. I am not referring to a program in every church but an awareness of the local programs. Every city has Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) for adolescent age students.

The solution is to know where they are and when they meet so the church can refer parents and students accordingly. Knowledge of the current programs in your neighborhood is one thing, but knowing what's actually out there is another. Learn what students are using and how often because we know it's inevitable that they are faced with the choice to use or not use.

I think it's vital to personally talk to parents and somehow train them to know what to look for. Unfortunately, it's easy for teens to fool parents and youth workers that they are not involved in the usage of drugs or alcohol. Parents can look for certain symptoms and changes that may tip them off to the activity in their teen's life. Parents can also be encouraged to continue activities that will help prevent the use of drugs or alcohol -- things like eating dinner with the family regularly, being concerned about a student's school work, verbally addressing feelings that using drugs are morally wrong, not drinking or using themselves, and attending church regularly as a family.

In conclusion, it's a comfort to say that there are many ways to get outside help with the issue of drug and alcohol abuse. Search within your community for teen rehabilitation centers, drug counselors, and even law enforcement programs that may assist in the treatment. The drug and alcohol issue may seem like a war that can't be won, but it can be fought. Have confidence that proper care and support is out there.