



Episode 5

Prevention Speaker

Overview

Given that research shows that 90% of people enrolled in addiction treatment began using substances under the age of 17, preventing teen use plays a role in protecting the vulnerable developing brain from the disease of addiction.

Topic

This episode featured a discussion on the strategies used to design a comprehensive prevention program through authenticity and personal experiences.

Family System

Tonight's episode featured our prevention speakers sharing their experience of learning how to utilize their personal experiences with substance use & abuse to play a comprehensive role in preventing early substance use in teens.

Our speakers were Lyndsey, who celebrated 15 years in recovery and is the mother of two preschool-aged children, Marianna who is the mother of a middle school student, Katie who is yet to be a mom and Danny, who celebrates his third year in recovery as he prepares to pursue a graduate degree in clinical psychology.

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Clinical Overview

Today, the War on Drugs has climbed to deadlier heights than at any other point in history, with over 100,000 overdose deaths in a 12-month span.* The United States continues in its efforts to save lives and treat addiction and, of course, many programs like LSIS play a role in preventing the disease.

Given that research shows that 90% of people enrolled in addiction treatment began using substances under the age of 17, preventing teen use plays a role in protecting the vulnerable developing brain from the disease of addiction.** Teen use remains a concern for most American families, and while many parents live with a fear of addiction in their children, most people look at their children and see well-adjusted athletes with good grades and good friends who may or may not be engaging in risky behavior.

Prevention programming or any conversation around substance use must be broad enough to ensure that those who are making healthy decisions keep doing so, and for those already taking risks, encourage them to stop and seek help.

Historically, prevention programs have focused on scare tactic approaches, highlighting the negative consequences of drug use with graphic images of car accidents, handcuffed risks, jail cells slamming, and images of homelessness.

The 1980s marked a decade of “just say no” slogans and programs highlighting an image of scrambled eggs indicating “this is your brain on drugs.” This was paired with the D.A.R.E. program, which was offered in schools throughout the United States. The D.A.R.E. program and much of the “Just Say No” campaigns ran into considerable criticism as what was found was a significant improvement in teen tobacco use but no change in marijuana or alcohol use.

These strategies serve only to fuel stigma and ultimately create a barrier to seeking treatment. It bares mentioning that perpetuating this stigma has a negative impact on community investment in prevention programming.

*Ahmad FB, Cisewski JA. Quarterly provisional estimates for selected indicators of mortality, 2018-Quarter 3, 2020. National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Vital Statistics Rapid Release Program. 2021.

**National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse Columbia University, 2011

In 1997 the National Institute on Drug Abuse published their Prevention Principles, which outlines research-based strategies for successful strategies for the development of prevention programming. The principles focus on promoting protective factors, reducing/addressing risk factors as well as utilizing a systemic approach of involving communities and families in all efforts.

LSIS uses these principles to guide all program development and, for today's discussion, our prevention speaker program.

Prevention Speakers & School-Based Prevention Programming

Prevention speakers are individuals with lived experience of substance use and recovery who can share their stories and provide a relatable and engaging learning experience for students.

Incorporating prevention speakers into school-based prevention programming can help to create a supportive and informative environment that empowers students to make healthy choices. Prevention speakers can also serve as positive role models towards secondary prevention and demonstrate to students that recovery is possible.

Using a prevention speaker with lived experience in school prevention programming can be an effective primary and secondary prevention strategy as it reduces stigma around addiction and encourages students to seek help when needed.

- **Personal Stories:** Hearing from a young person in recovery who's gone through similar experiences can help students feel less alone and more likely to seek help themselves. LSIS sees the impact daily of stigma reduction in classrooms as prevention speakers provide a human face to a complex issue.
- **Honest Dialogue:** LSIS prevention speakers provide an authentic experience through an open and honest dialogue around the challenges of adolescence as it relates to decisions around substance use in the safety of the classroom environment with the facilitation of a mental health

professional. Students can ask questions and share their own thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment, helping to reduce stigma by fostering empathy and understanding among preventions.

- **Normalization of Help-Seeking Behaviors:** In any given classroom, while primary prevention is the goal, the reality is many students are already in need of secondary prevention strategies. When LSIS speakers share their own experiences, it encourages students to seek help, which subsequently helps normalize help-seeking behavior. This models to those at risk for a chronic disease that seeking help is common and a healthy response to substance use and addiction.
- **Building Trust:** LSIS speakers help build trust between students and school staff by serving as a bridge between the two because LSIS prevention speakers are generationally relatable, and students are more likely to engage with programming themselves. This can help reduce stigma by creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for all students.

Beyond Lived Experience

Parents play a vital role in substance use prevention by sharing their own experiences with their children, regardless of the type of experiences, be they abstaining from use, experimenting with substances, or abusing and developing an addiction. By being honest and open about their struggles with peer pressure and the choices made around substances can reduce the stigma surrounding addiction as well as make it easier for children to seek help around peer pressure, boundary-setting and, if needed, fighting the challenges of addiction to substances.

Protective aspects of conversations around substance abuse

- Conversations around substance abuse promote more conversations.
- Encouraging a child to speak with an adult about substance abuse allows a family/community/school to promote transparency as it relates to exposure and experimentation.
- All conversations promote positive relationships with adults that serve as a protective factor as it promotes the skills needed for asking for help and seeking support in decision-making.

Potential risks during conversations

Conversations about using substances and wise words from someone who's already walked the road are not enough for successful prevention programming. In fact, it is crucial that the topic be approached with care. Providing accurate information paired with practical strategies for healthy decision-making and boundary-setting with peers is necessary, but care must be taken to avoid inadvertently sparking curiosity and providing instruction on drug and alcohol use.

- Without a thoughtful approach to language and position of messaging, conversations can leave students with false impressions and promote curiosity around substances.
- Conversations that do not thoroughly explore the personal, social, academic, and legal consequences of substance use and abuse fail to provide children with the necessary information needed to promote healthy decision-making.
- Conversations that do not address the specific emotional stressors faced by today's youth fail to provide tweens/teens with the necessary skills to protect them from the negative influence of peer pressure and temptation of the quick-fix coping skill of substance use.
- Conversations that promote scare tactics of "don't use drugs or else" have been shown to be quite ineffective in preventing early substance use due to their tendency to fall short of promoting protective factors and instead promoting the risk-taking allure of substance use which teens and tweens often find appealing.
- Conversations around substance abuse are susceptible to inadvertently glorifying the dangerous risk-taking aspects of substance abuse perpetuated by media portrayals that minimize the vulnerability of teens to the development of the disease of addiction.

Takeaways

With all this discussion of strategies, it is important that we highlight the most important aspect of this episode: authenticity. The deliberate nature of strategizing and organizing prevention programming must never lose the authentic nature of the interpersonal connection. There can be no prevention without a connection between the individual and their family, their support network, their school, and their community.

All programming will require that the students experience an authentic display of descriptions of credible information and scientific facts, as well as the role substances and social perceptions and misconceptions play in developing the disease of addiction. This episode features four of our prevention speakers sharing their experiences of implementing these principles into the delivery of their aspect of a comprehensive prevention program.

One theme you hear throughout the episode is that each speaker learned more about the reasons that led them to initially use substances. Each of them shares that as they took on the role of “Prevention Speaker” and began to implement deliberate strategies to fulfill their role, they learned more about themselves and the reasons they began to use.

Some speakers have also shared that this has helped reinforce their recovery by promoting healthy coping skills and self-reflection and encouraging them to seek support in the face of a relapse cycle. This allows them to approach their role in an authentic way that relates in real time to what the students are also experiencing.

Macro Level Considerations

This episode’s discussion invites us all to stop and consider what thought we put into our prevention strategies from the dinner table to the classroom and into the community. Previous well-intentioned programs often featured police officers arriving at schools in sports cars seized during drug raids.

This strategy may have intended to increase the appeal of the police officer and improve his social standing or “street cred,” but it also inadvertently glorifies the social standing and status of drug dealers since the reality is, it was their sport’s car. Yes, they were eventually arrested, and all the toys or assets were seized, but teenagers do not see themselves facing legal consequences. The reality is that most of us have more experiences avoiding consequences than facing them.

Think of how often you roll through a stop sign, sail through a yellow light, or drive over the speed limit, your experience suggests to you that the odds are, in fact, in your favor. This mirrors the

experience of teenagers when it relates to keeping secrets and avoiding accountability. This results in inauthentic messaging that loses credibility over time, if it ever had any at the onset.

The prevalence of substance use among children and adolescents is a major public health concern. All children, regardless of their social or economic background, are considered at risk for substance use. The risk is due to a multitude of factors, including peer pressure, stress, mental health disorders, and easy access to drugs and alcohol.

Prevention programming aimed at reducing substance use may take them also faceted approach, considering the unique risk factors present in different areas and social determinants of health. However, it is important to note that while exposure to substances may be common among children, experimentation and regular use do not have to be a rite of passage.

Effective prevention programming can empower children with skills to resist peer pressure, manage stress, and make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

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