

HOW TO ASSIST YOUR MENTEE TO MAKE SAFER CHOICES ABOUT DRUGS OR ALCOHOL



Alcohol, drugs and young people can be a lethal combination but it is not a realistic solution to simply tell a mentee to say “no”. The most effective protection we can offer young people is to educate them about the actual and potential effects of drugs and alcohol on their mind, body and behaviour. Discuss with them some of the negative consequences of drug and alcohol consumption and empower them so they know they have choices.

This fact sheet offers some information about the effects of alcohol and some of the more common drugs available in New Zealand, and details some suggestions on how to talk to young people about making safer choices.

TALKING ABOUT ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

It is tempting not to address the issue until you have to, for example when there is a perceived problem with use, but is much safer to educate your mentee about drugs and alcohol before they are facing pressure to try them in social situations. Early discussions might simply involve sharing your own values about drugs and alcohol, and your reasoning behind those values. This will give your mentee a chance to explore their own ideas about alcohol and drugs before they are faced with decisions about whether and to what extent they may try them.

1. Where possible begin discussions about drugs and alcohol before the teenage years.
2. Don't mount a personal attack, deliver a sermon, or make sweeping bans on your mentee ever having a drink or drugs (especially as you will not be in a position to monitor them). Saying an outright “no” without any explanation may even add to the appeal and it will also mean your mentee is unlikely to be honest about any experiences they do have.

3. Instead of taking the “big talk” approach, look for opportunities in your normal conversations to develop a dialogue about it – this could be a story in the news about the drinking age or it could be your mentee is studying for their learner licence, which has a zero alcohol tolerance as a condition of driving.
4. Chances are your mentee will have incomplete or incorrect knowledge about drugs and alcohol so provide them with up to date and factual information – letting them know what it does to the body and mind, particularly of younger people.
5. No one can shield a young person from the social and commercial pressure to use alcohol or drugs but you can build their sense of self-worth, give them the hard facts, talk about limits and keep the lines of communication open – all of which can contribute to safer choices.

LET YOUR MENTEE KNOW:

- that drugs and alcohol make young people (and adults) more prone to dangerous accidents
- they can never trust the quality of drugs or know exactly how they will respond to them, even the same drug can have a different effect on a different day
- that drugs can poison and/or kill them
- that their life is too precious to take chances with.

KEEPING THEM SAFE

Educating your mentee about drugs and alcohol can help them make better choices but it is unrealistic to expect they will always say “no”, so ask them to remember the rules that will keep them (and their friends) alive:

- **Never** drive when you have been drinking alcohol or taking drugs
- **Never** get into a car if the driver has been drinking alcohol or taking drugs
- **Always** ring for help if you need to get home or away from a dangerous situation
- **Dial 111** if there are any concerns about someone's breathing or consciousness after they have consumed alcohol and/or taken drugs.

FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

ALCOHOL

- When a person drinks alcohol it acts on nerve cells deep in the brain.
- Consuming two drinks in an hour can impair judgment, lower inhibitions, and induce mild euphoria – all of which means you do things after drinking that you would not normally do, including participating in behaviour that risks your safety or other people's safety.
- Studies have shown that repeated alcohol exposure may affect a young person's memory and ability to learn.
- Alcohol, like other drugs, can be addictive – if you get into the habit of drinking you may not be able to stop even when you want to.

DRUGS

Marijuana

- The main active chemical in marijuana binds with protein receptors in the membranes of your body's nerve cells.
- The short term effects of marijuana use include problems with: memory and learning, distorted perception, difficulty in thinking and problem-solving, loss of coordination, increased heart rate, unpredictable emotions, anxiety and panic attacks.
- Longer term effects include lung deterioration (initially this may show up as coughing, phlegm and frequent chest colds), the risk of overloading the cardiovascular system (because of severe increases in heart rate and blood pressure), decline in ability to learn and retain information, and lasting changes in temperament leading to anger, aggression and depression.
- Marijuana can be addictive – if you get into the habit of smoking marijuana you may not be able to stop even when you want to.
- Marijuana can be very different in strength and effect depending on factors such as where it was grown, its preparation – so you can never predict how it will affect you.

Methamphetamine – or "P"

- Methamphetamine (also known as P, pure, speed, meth, crystal and ice) can come in a powder, crystal-like 'rock' form or a pill and it is increasingly prevalent in New Zealand.
- Methamphetamine affects the central nervous system and even small amounts can cause increased wakefulness, increased respiration, hyperthermia, irritability, insomnia, confusion, tremors, convulsions, anxiety, paranoia, and aggressiveness. Hyperthermia and convulsions can result in death.
- Methamphetamine causes increased heart rate and blood pressure and can cause irreversible damage to blood vessels in the brain, producing strokes.
- Other effects of methamphetamine include respiratory problems, irregular heartbeat, and extreme anorexia. Its use can result in cardiovascular collapse and death.
- Methamphetamine is highly addictive – if you use it you may not be able to stop even when you want to.

ALCOHOL OR DRUG ABUSE

If your mentee has a serious alcohol or drug abuse problem you will need to seek professional help. You are morally and legally obliged to share information about your mentee where their personal safety and wellbeing is at risk – or where their behaviour and actions are threatening someone else's safety or wellbeing.

Party-Pills

- Party pills are psychoactive substances and are now illegal under the Misuse of Drugs Act.
- Party pills are often based on two ingredients, BZP (benzylpiperazine) and TFMPP (trifluoro-methyl-phenylpiperazine), combined with other chemicals such as piper nigrum, phenylalanine, tryptophan and tyrosine.
- Party pills are designed to mimic the effects of other illegal drugs such as methamphetamine (speed, P), MDMA (ecstasy) and LSD (acid, trips), but are purported to be not as dangerous as these drugs. However, little is known about the long-term effects of party pill substances.

NON-CONFRONTATIONAL WAYS TO DISCUSS DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE

"It may seem that everyone else is using drugs, but that's not true. My concern is that your drug or alcohol use may have serious consequences for you."

"Learning how to deal with drugs and alcohol is part of growing up. I am happy to answer any questions you have now or any time you want to talk about it."

"Can I share my concerns with you? I am anxious because I think you may be using ---. It really worries me because I know the harm this could cause now and in the future. Can we discuss it together please?"

"I will do whatever I can to help if there is a problem, and if I do not know what to do I will try to find help. My reasons for talking to you about this are because I care about your happiness and success."



WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Google Adolescent and Teenage brain development to read some interesting articles on this topic.
- The brainwave Trust is also a good source of information. www.brainwave.org.nz