

Substance Abuse in Adolescents and Resiliency

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Substance abuse and addiction typically begin in adolescence. This could be due in part mostly to the fact that at this stage of the life span, individuals begin to look outside of their family unit for acceptance and a sense of identity. Because of this and the undeveloped brain, adolescence might begin to make riskier decisions and succumb to peer pressure. (Wong et al., 2020, p. 182). Current research regarding addiction and substance abuse in relation to resilience within the adolescent population shows that factors such as peer influence, individual characteristics and family dynamics play a role. Research shows that some youth, while exposed to trauma end up down the route of drug use, while others do not. Can this be attributed to resiliency level within the individual, and possible protective factors that help the individual to overcome substance abuse? Research has been alluding to the fact that prevention programming can help to lessen the impact of addiction on this population. (Rudzinski, McDonough, Gartner, & Strike, 2017). Since this population is less likely to seek out treatment facilities for drug abuse, having community-based programs is essential. While there is limited research on treatment of adolescents, some research shows that rates of drug and alcohol use can be reduced by utilizing a combination of both early intervention and harm reduction methods. (Jiloha, 2017).

Healthy spiritual development can affect the likelihood of substance use and addiction in adolescent years, by giving them a sense of hope and purpose. Having a healthy spiritual life allows the individual to look outside of themselves and their want for self-indulgence. Spirituality in adolescents also often comes with a community, one that can be a positive influence, especially if their home life is unhealthy or unsafe. Studies have shown that when adolescents have a healthy spiritual development, they are less likely to turn to substances when experiencing stress. This shows that spirituality may be a feasible coping mechanism. (Debnam, Milam, Mullen, Lacey, & Bradshaw, 2017).

Data shows an uptick in prescription drug misuse and abuse. The most abused types of prescription drugs are stimulants, opioids, and depressants. These kinds of drugs are extremely harmful to the developing brain and can lead to significant delays in brain growth. Since the prefrontal cortex is at such a critical point in development at this stage, this type of drug usage can disrupt and damage neural pathways. Additionally, as pathways in the brain are used more and more, they become reinforced thus causing addiction to have life-long effects on an individual. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). The prevalence of addiction in adolescents is especially pervasive and is something that is heavily linked to addiction in adulthood. These issues in early adolescents are vital to be addressed within the counseling context because counselors have a great duty and responsibility to educate youth on the harmful effects of drug use, especially in its relation to mental health complications. Future research should focus on a deeper look into how an adolescent's usage of drugs effects their brain development all the way into adulthood. Additionally, this can be linked to comorbidity of future mental health issues and disorders. Longitudinal studies on mental illness, drug use and resiliency in adults is something that needs more research for a better overall treatment of adolescents, to best ensure their future success and health.

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