Helping Peer Mentors Address Substance Use

Many youth want to learn about drugs (and sex, money and other adult-oriented things). They usually want honest and practical information. And peers are often their "go to" source. Schools can help youth get good information by training peer mentors in how to talk about drugs and drug use in honest, practical ways.

Start with the Basics

One step in the honest-and-practical direction involves knowing some basic facts about humans and drugs.

Drug use is part of the human experience. From caffeine and alcohol to cannabis and opiates, drugs have been both helpful and harmful to people in nearly every society since the beginning of human history.

Substance use is a complex human behaviour. Exploring complexity is more about raising questions than providing answers. Simplistic approaches (like "just say no" or scare-tactics) may be well-intentioned, but they aren't very effective. Helping people think about why they do what they do, or why they believe certain things, is likely to have more impact.

Our environments shape us. The social and cultural contexts in which we live, work and play influences us more than we think. So building a healthy social environment in the school is important. Everyone should feel valued, cared about and supported. Everyone should have access to health-promoting resources and options.

Helping others is more about listening and encouraging than telling. A mentor leads by example and inspires others. A mentor recognizes that people are experts on themselves. The best we can do is help someone else sift through their own thoughts and ideas, and draw out and strengthen their readiness to change. Mentoring is not fixing people or solving problems. It's about helping people understand and reach their own goals.

Activities for Training Peer Mentors

The *Peer Mentor Training* activities on the Helping Schools page can be used to train peer mentors in addressing substance use related matters. They are easy to implement, focus on practical knowledge and skills and are based on current evidence. Trainers are encouraged to select and adapt the activities to meet the needs of the trainees. Feedback sent to carbcvan@uvic.ca will be used in further development of these resources.

Helpful Resources for Peer Mentors

Understanding Substance Use

Helping People Who Use Substances

The Art of Motivation

Adolescent Health Survey Youth Resources – a web page containing a series of resources related to meaningfully engaging youth in discussions related to their health as well as information on other resources.

Helping Schools – a web-based collection of resources developed by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC at the University of Victoria.

Here to Help - a web-based collection of fact sheets, self-help materials and other resources developed by the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

A Quick Summary of the Evidence on Peer Mentoring

The importance of peer mentoring was highlighted by youth in consultations conducted by the BC government in preparing *Healthy Minds, Healthy People: A Ten-Year Plan to Address Mental Health and Substance Use in British Columbia* (Ministry of Health Services & Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2010). This fits with the idea that a community's wellness is enhanced by mobilizing its assets, and that peer influence should be seen as a positive asset and not regarded simply in negative terms like "peer-pressure" (Kretzmann, McKnight, Dobrowolski, & Puntenney, 2005). Furthermore, formal studies have identified peer leadership and mentoring among best practices for addressing youth substance use (Cheon, 2008; Cuijpers, 2002). Very little research has examined how to maximize the positive impact of peer mentorship, but evidence related to adult mentoring of youth points to the importance of attention to sound theory (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Building on social influence theory, mentors should be supported to provide a positive influence within their normal social networks and not just within specialized programs.

References

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