

UNDERSTANDING AND NURTURING CRITICAL THINKING



WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

Most of us have heard about critical thinking. But what does the concept actually mean? Critical thinking is a way of thinking in which we reflect on, question and analyze ideas, values and norms while suspending judgement. Critical thinking is not skepticism or cynicism. Nor is it simply a technique. It is a process of reflection with a sympathetic and optimistic vision of possibility. In this sense, critical thinking is also creative and caring as it considers other perspectives, and other people's welfare.

People engaged in critical thinking often ask questions (of themselves and others) such as:

- Why do I believe what I believe?
- Why are things the way they are?
- How do I know what to do?
- What are alternative possibilities?



WHY CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT DRUGS AND GAMBLING?

Drugs and gambling are both deeply interwoven in modern Canadian culture. Young people are exposed to conflicting messages. They are officially told not to use drugs or gamble. Yet, many of the people they respect do so, and their own involvement may be overlooked, allowed or even encouraged by adults in their lives.

Critical thinking gives young people the tools to think critically about drug use and gambling. It allows them to reflect on their own assumptions and values, make informed and thoughtful choices and navigate a world in which substance use and gambling are common and available. Critical thinking is an important capacity for surviving and thriving in such a world.

Critical thinking is also important in being an informed and active citizen. Reflecting critically and empathetically on how behaviours might be linked to physical and social environments helps students understand each other and support one another. In the context of drugs and gambling, such critical and caring thinking helps young people understand why some people may use drugs or gamble. It also helps them become engaged and active citizens committed to addressing the injustices and inequities that impact others.



HOW TO NURTURE CRITICAL THINKING

Teachers and schools can provide a safe learning environment where students can explore who they are (individually and collectively) and develop critical thinking skills. This might be thought of as continuously and progressively wrestling with a set of foundational questions such as the following.

WHY DO WE THINK WHAT WE THINK?

Reflecting on one's own assumptions and values and where they come from is a good starting point for thinking critically about an issue.

- When reading a story, you might pause and ask students to reflect on what a character is thinking and why they might be thinking that thought.
- When a student shares an idea, gently ask them to think about why they think that, and what that thought is built on.
- As students engage with each other, encourage them to ask their peers why they think what they think and to explore why different people might think differently about the same situation.

CAN WE TRUST OUR SOURCES?

Nurturing critical thinking also means getting students to think about where they get their information from. Comparing and questioning different sources of information allows students to assess the accuracy of information they are receiving.

- When students refer to any source to justify a claim or a belief, encourage them to think about why they choose to trust that source.
- Formal exercises where students individually look for information about a specific topic and then compare and assess the sources they used can help develop critical thinking.

WHAT CAN I LEARN FROM YOU?

Engaging in dialogue about drugs, gambling or any topic requires an open curiosity to try to understand another's perspective. Only through thoughtful, critical openness to other perspectives can we learn and grow.

- Model open curiosity in your own interactions with students.
- Invite students to problem solve in pairs or small groups to practice listening to other points of view and learning from each other.

- Ask students open-ended questions that encourage reflection such as, "How are your ideas similar or different from others' perspectives?"

WHERE COULD WE GO WITH THIS?

Critical thinking is not just about assessing existing ideas; it is also about imagining possibilities. Critical imagining turns "pipe dreams" into real possibilities.

- Create space for openness and wonder by encouraging students to think outside the box by asking "what if" or "what could be" questions but also encourage them to explore "why?" and "how?"

SO, WHAT AM I TO DO?

Critical thinking can help students gain new understanding and use this new knowledge to move forward in some way.

- Invite students to reflect on what they have learned and how it changes them through an artistic creation such as a short story or a poem.
- Encourage journaling as a way for students to think about the usefulness of what they have learned.



A FINAL WORD ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING AND DRUGS OR GAMBLING

Exploring the human phenomena of drug use and gambling in different cultures and historical periods, in literature or other texts, nurtures critical thinking about these issues in a wide range of learning contexts. Find resources to do just that at www.iminds.ca.

