

SHARE's Top 10 (ok... 13) for Talking about Substance Use with Youth (March 2021)

1. Confidentiality and Informed Consent

Make sure you are fully aware of the policies and procedures you should follow if a youth confides in you. Get clear on your own limits of confidentiality and be up front and explicit about them with youth before they start talking. This is ethical, respectful and professional. Conversations could result in disclosures from youth regarding their own wellbeing, or the wellbeing of a friend – if a disclosure arises that falls within your duty to report, the conversation you facilitate about confidentiality will be what you fall back (and could potentially save your relationship) when you navigate next steps with a youth.

2. Check Yourself

- You may feel that you're already aware of your biases. You may have certain goals for the conversations or perspectives about substance use that may be hard to leave behind. How do you think your opinions and perspectives about drug/alcohol use might influence your discussions with youth? By reviewing these perceptions and reflecting on your attitudes, beliefs and approaches, you'll be better prepared for the types of conversations that young people want to have about substances.
- Check out CCSA's *Talking Pot With Youth: A Cannabis Communication Guide for Youth Allies*.

3. Create a Safe Space

Acknowledge the power you have in the room and bring to the conversation (as an adult with authority - it just is, whether you want it or not). Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Think about your language, tone and approach. Use shared language yet avoid stigmatizing words or call them out (e.g. junkie or getting "clean"). Avoid conveying bias and/or own it if you do. Be present and mindful. Be aware of your emotions and the emotions of others. Actively LISTEN. Listen without interruption and when the youth finishes, show interest, ask meaningful, open-ended questions (e.g. Can you tell me more about your opinion on that?) Be curious. Acknowledge emotions. Practice silence. Be Honest. Provide Supportive Responses. Be mindful of non-verbal communication. Steer away from moral judgments – "good" or "bad". Be aware and inform youth that shame grows with judgment, silence and secrecy, and rapidly decreases with openness, vulnerability, empathy, validation.

4. Offer Credible, Unbiased, and Current Research information and Harm Reduction Strategies, As Appropriate

- Information needs to be shared in the context of relationship. Scare tactics have been proven to be ineffective. It is essential to acknowledge the incredibly biased and ineffective drug education that has come before (e.g. "Just Say No") and the plethora of adults who will have biases around this topic (it is fair for their parents to have strong values/beliefs around this).
- *It can be helpful to inform youth that the research is clear: **The younger, the more frequently and the more heavily they use, the greater the risk for mental health and substance use problems to develop as they get older.*** Don't lead with this though! Build your street cred first by being curious, gentle, an active listener, non-judgemental (or at the very least a "mindfully judgemental") facilitator, hold the safety with transparency – Kids only care how much you know once they know how much you care!
- See websites listed below.

5. Consider and Support Adolescent Brain Development

- Acknowledge the youth's autonomy in their life/choices.
- Ask open-ended questions – these encourage youth to practice critical thinking and assessment skills (executive functioning skills) and build their prefrontal cortex. When you need to intervene – be clear and as collaborative as possible about what will happen next.

6. Consider the Diversity of Youth Experiences and the Impacts of Trauma

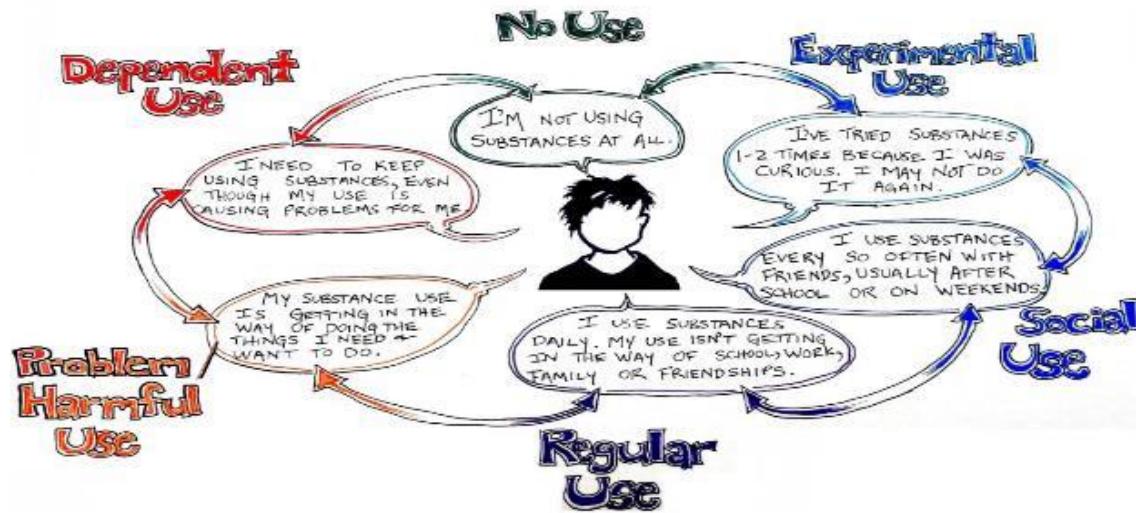
- Do your own personal analyses on structuralism/social justice/anti-oppression so you are better equipped to set the stage for the sensitive yet important conversations that may arise. We want to make space for these to be as inclusive and meaningful for all those involved. If we're asking youth to practice critical thinking, then we need to model how this works. We are adults BUT we are not the experts! Tough questions are a gift (sometimes in disguise)! Be accountable to these tough questions! So do your homework – take a look at some resources on social justice, equity, diversity and inclusion & acknowledge experiences of intersectional oppression - these could include but are not limited to: racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, gender inequality, ageism, the stigma of familial mental health concerns, criminality, the list goes on. Like we said earlier... explicitly own your power and privilege.
- Take into account an understanding of trauma in all aspects of your practice and environment focusing on the individual's **safety, choice, and control**. Be collaborative. Create opportunities for *youth* to provide feedback, ask questions, or express their concerns. Focus and build on youth's strengths, safety and engagement. Discover what helps the youth feel empowered.
- Stigma can act as a barrier in engaging youth in open and honest conversations substance use and their own experiences. Assume that students will have family members, friends, pop culture figures, etc. sharing differing values, differing messages – much of which can be contradictory and confusing! Get curious to know about each individual's personal interest in it and their personal impacts. It is vital to explore the risks AND the benefits of using.

7. Consider Likely Misconceptions/Questions and Invite More Questions

You'll feel more confident discussing difficult topics if you've prepared yourself for the different scenarios that may arise and the questions you may face. You can do this both by reading around the topic and by thinking about misconceptions you have heard around school or in the media recently. Or asking youth about the messages they have heard/perceptions they have and incorporate these into your conversations. Let youth educate you.

8. Know the Continuum of Substance Use.

Be prepared to explore it with a youth. Get a sense of where they think they're at on the continuum and what would indicate the beginnings of problem to them. Support them in learning natural self-regulation strategies – the more substances are relied upon to



9. Hold off on Self-Disclosure – this is the last tool in the tool kit.

Questions to ask yourself when considering self-disclosure:

- Why am I sharing this?
- What outcome am I hoping for?
- What emotions am I experiencing?
- Do my intentions around sharing align with my values?
- Is there an outcome, a response or a lack of a response that will hurt my feelings?
- Is this sharing in the service of connection?

Source: Brene Brown - Daring Greatly

10. Signpost Support

Locate sources of school, local and national support. Highlight these with students and explain how they can be accessed. Be sure to also explain what is likely to happen if a youth seeks support as this can be a source of fear. Have harm reduction resources in your toolkit to make available when appropriate.

11. Be Prepared to Safety Plan!

Have Quick and Easy Access to Resources Outlining the Steps to Prevent, Recognize and respond to an overdose. Resources can be found at:

- towardtheheart.com
- fraserhealth.ca/health-topics-a-to-z/mental-health-and-substance-use/overdose-prevention-and-response

12. Know the Stages of Change and Match your Approach to the Stage

Pre-Contemplative Stage – “What Problem?”

Contemplative Stage – “Okay, so I think I might have a problem.”

Determination/Preparation – “I need to do something about this.”

Action Stage – “This is what I plan to do...”

Maintenance Stage – “I’d like to keep this up.”

Lapse – “I slipped and am back on track.”

Relapse – “I have to get back on track.”

13. First, Do No Harm!

If you don't feel able to provide a non-judgmental, unbiased, honest environment and discuss harm reduction... STOP before you get too far into the conversation that you are tempted to say something that could create dissonance, taint your credibility or lead to further safety concerns. **Connect the youth with someone who can.**

Websites:

- foundrybc.ca
- keltymentalhealth.ca
- heretohelp.bc.ca
- teenmentalhealth.org
- familysmart.ca
- towardtheheart.com

Short guides/Workbooks:

- Recognizing Resilience: A Workbook for Parents and Caregivers of Teens Using Substances – Vancouver Island Health Authority
islandhealth.ca/sites/default/files/2018-04/recognizing-resilience-workbook.pdf
- Talking Pot With Youth: A Cannabis Communication Guide for Youth Allies – Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction
ccsa.ca/talking-pot-youth-cannabis-communication-guide-youth-allies
- The Art of Motivation Guide - Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research
uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/publications/screening-tools/art-of-motivation/index.php
- Cannabis Talk Kit: Know How to Talk with Your Teen – Drug Free Kids Canada
drugfreekidsCanada.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Cannabis-Talk-Kit_EN.pdf
- Substance Use and Young People: A Guide for Families and Their Caring Communities – BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information
heretohelp.bc.ca/workbook/substance-use-and-young-people
- You and Substance Use Mini Workbook - Communities – BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information (for the person who is a substance using, if they are open to it)
heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/you-and-substance-use-stuff-to-think-about-and-ways-to-make-changes.pdf

