

Sarah Bagley: Hi, I'm Dr. Sarah Bagley. I'd like to talk to you today about the importance of addressing substance use in adolescence and adulthood. Teens and young adults are wired to take risks and to experiment. That means that teens and young adults are more likely to use drugs. Adolescents and young adults are susceptible to boredom, to peer pressure. And this puts them at a higher risk of using alcohol and other drugs. Adolescents and young adults may also be experiencing feelings of depression or anxiety or potentially bullying at school. And those are some reasons that they may decide to experiment with alcohol and other drugs.

While experimentation with drug and alcohol use during adolescence and young adulthood doesn't necessarily lead to addiction, we know that most people who develop an addiction later on started to use substances before they were 18 years old. Even for those adolescents and young adults who do not develop addiction there is still risks associated with using substances, such as engaging in unsafe sex practices, getting in motor vehicle accidents, and being vulnerable to other kinds of injuries. Alcohol and marijuana are the most commonly used substances by adolescents. According to Monitoring the Future, a national survey conducted every year with high school students, we know that about 55% of all 12th graders have used alcohol in the last year and about 36% of all 12th graders have used marijuana in the last year.

Importantly, although there is a high prevalence of alcohol and marijuana use in teenagers, we also know that these rates are the lowest that they have been in years. And that's really encouraging news. It means that the prevention programs that we have been implemented over the past decade or so are making a real difference. We also know that it means that when we're talking to teens who may say to us, "It feels like everyone is using," we can actually use data and statistics to tell them that not all of their friends are drinking and not all of their friends are smoking marijuana.

Adolescence is a critical time for brain development and we know that addiction is a brain disease. All drugs work a little bit differently, but there's a similarity. They all increase the amount of dopamine in our brain and dopamine is the chemical that affects our reward system and makes us feel good. It's normal to want to feel good and so our dopamine may increase if we eat or we do something that's enjoyable. It also increases if we use a drug or use alcohol. The adolescent brain, which is immature and is seeking sensations, responds really positively when the dopamine increases in their brain and they're at ... that adolescent is going to seek to repeat that experience and over time those repeated exposures can lead to addiction.

There are certain factors that we consider when treating adolescents and young adults who have substance use disorder. We're trying to prevent the downstream effects of addiction and development of other chronic medical problems associated with addiction and we have good treatments. And we know that if we intervene early, we engage adolescents and young adults in treatment, we can prevent those long-term effects. It's also important because it allows us to intervene and try to prevent any of the short-term effects, like unwanted pregnancy, transmission of sexually transmitted infections, or other infections that might be associated with injection drug use.

It's important to understand that many adolescents and young adults who had substance use disorder also may have other mental health diagnoses, like anxiety or depression. When we treat adolescents and young adults, we have to consider the other diagnoses they may have and want to make sure that we're treating both of those conditions together. We know that adolescents and young adults who are treated for both their substance abuse and their mental health disorders do better. That means that they're able to go back to school, go back to jobs, and rejoin the lives that they want to have.