

## “Making a Difference”

“More than 120,000 Americans die annually from drug and alcohol-related abuse.”<sup>1</sup> Imagine-- 328 people in this country die every day because of the horrific influence of drugs and alcohol. That is a staggering statistic and the number is rising. How do we reverse this increasing death rate? Like many of the other overwhelming social issues plaguing our nation, the first step is to target the youth.

“The average age at which Americans begin drinking regularly is 15.9 years old.”<sup>2</sup> Why? Most of the young people in this country have been educated about the effects of drug and alcohol abuse. Despite this knowledge, “every day, on average, 11,318 American youth (12 to 20 years of age) try alcohol for the first time.”<sup>3</sup> What makes the temptation to experiment with alcohol and drugs so appealing? The ~~batent~~ answer is peer pressure. Most adults, especially parents, would blame the problem on the fact that the desire for a young person to fit in with what everyone else is doing is much stronger than any logic or facts. While peer pressure certainly has a dramatic influence on the decisions of American youth, the alcohol and drugs situation is too complex and widespread for one simple, single cause.

Teens today are under an enormous amount of pressure: pressure to be their own person and yet follow the trends; pressure to succeed but in a cool way; pressure to have friends but only the right kind. The list goes on and on. For example, teens are being forced into early adulthood by the advancement in academic and extracurricular expectations and by the financial awareness due to the deteriorating economic conditions. However, the worst aspect of the stressful lives of teens today is the attack on families. Historically, families- parents and siblings and other relatives- have been the support system in place for teenagers; but, with the almost unbelievable increase in divorce rate, more kids than not come from broken or struggling homes. Thus, they are forced to deal with the increase in pressure with a decrease of support. Somehow, they need to cope, to find a way to escape the pressure, and unfortunately, many of them turn to drugs and alcohol. Popular movies, TV shows, advertisements and other media suggest the message that, not only is getting drunk or high cool socially, but that losing touch with reality makes problems disappear. In fact, the opposite is true. While the momentary sensation might be pleasant, the hangover and added consequences of poor decisions only contributes to the other problems. So why do it again? While the reasoning seems insensible, teens report that they drink/use again to get away from the negative

repercussions from the last binge, creating a downward spiral into addiction and dependence.

In Oregon especially, the drug and alcohol situation is distressing. “Oregonians consume more alcohol than the national average, live in a state that ranks fourth nationwide for alcohol-related deaths and have a drug-mortality rate that's been double the U.S. average for five years in a row.”<sup>4</sup> Alcohol and drug abuse by Oregonian youths is particularly out of control. “The percentage of eighth-graders who said they drank alcohol... was 76 percent higher than the national average” and “the rate of use of inhalants by young people in Oregon was 50 percent higher than that nationwide.”<sup>4</sup>

As an Oregonian youth, these numbers make me sick. These are my peers, the kids in my neighborhood and at my school and they are essentially killing themselves. How do we stop it? What can I do to help these friends who are trying to ease the pain and pressure in their lives? The best way for me to answer that question is with the question, “How do I cope with the pressure?” I am under the same amount of pressure as my peers, bad things happen in my life and I have the desire to be accepted, but I deal with those issues without drinking or drugs. How? Well, first of all, I do want to say that I am blessed with a wonderful, whole family who supports and encourages me when tough things happen. With that said, I still have to deal with the ups and downs of life, so I have developed other more productive methods for coping. When life gets hard to handle, I journal, go for walks or runs, sit down and read a book for a half-hour or find someone who will talk things through with me. These are suggestions I would give to anyone struggling with the desire to drink or do drugs in order to cope- find something active, expressive or relaxing to do. However, if I had a friend who was already struggling with drug or alcohol abuse, I would suggest a stronger course of action, probably therapy with trained professionals. Most of all, I would stress my support for that person.

Other effective ways to attack the drug and alcohol problem include increasing education and awareness, fighting positive displays of alcohol and drugs in media and advertisements, and supporting organizations that provide help for those struggling with drugs and alcohol.

“120,000 American deaths.”<sup>1</sup> That number *can* come down. Targeting the young people of this nation by understanding and responding to the reasons behind the problem is one step toward a solution. Increasing support for kids and teens now will positively affect

future generations and, hopefully, change the tide of destruction by alcohol and drugs in the United States and especially Oregon. Researching for this paper opened my eyes and I am now motivated and ready to do my part to fight the devastation caused by alcohol and drug abuse.

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### Sources

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