



NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Everybody is doing it!

By Michael D. Zito, PhD

This is the rallying cry of most teens to rationalize their behavior much to the chagrin of their parents. This becomes particularly problematic when the issue involves substance use. Teens who regularly drink alcohol or smoke marijuana believe that everybody, or almost everybody, drinks or smokes therefore thinking that their parents have no valid argument against their use. However, their perceptions, that mostly everybody is doing it, is far from the truth. Teens are misled by media reports, sensational stories they hear, and the narrow view of their close peer group.

The University of Michigan's Annual Substance Abuse Survey of over 40,000 teens found that substance use has been on the steady decline since the 1970s. This will probably come as a surprise to many parents due to stories from the media, what is discussed around town, as well as your own personal teen recollections. My university students express similar disbelief. For the past 5 years, my students have honestly answered the same questions included in the national survey, and their results confirm the larger study findings.

The national research asks high school seniors if they smoked marijuana or drank alcohol in the past 30 days, which would indicate regular use. The self-reported use of marijuana was about 33% in the 1970s, 20% in the 80s, 12% in the 90s, 21% in the 2000s, most recently 23% in 2013. The self-reported use of alcohol was about 78% in the 1970s, 65% in the 80s, 50% in the 90s, 45% in the 2000s, most recently 39% in 2013. Clearly, the majority of high school seniors are not smoking marijuana or drinking alcohol. Eighth and tenth graders in the national survey had rates lower than seniors.

So, why are perceptions so far off from the facts? The media often provides sensational reports of substance abuse and reports that substance abuse is dramatically on the rise. Well, these on the rise reports are taken out of context because while rates may have gone up 1-2 % in a given year, the overall trend has been down for 40 years. Teens overestimate the percentage of teens that use substances for two main reasons. First, teens hear sensational substance use stories from peers. They do not hear stories about teens that don't use (even though they exist) because it is not interesting news to share. This creates a false conclusion that non-users hardly exist because teens can only recall what they hear. Second, substance-using teens often

socialize with others who use which adds to the small group perceived consensus that everyone uses as they do.

Here is what parents should do

- Talk with your teen about use and substance abuse, and educate them about the real use rates because, if they incorrectly perceive that most teens are using, they will be more likely to as well.
- When your teen claims everybody uses, ask them to count all the users they know in their grade and divide that by the number of students in their grade to get a real percentage of kids who use.
- Help your child understand that not hearing about the non-use story creates a false impression about use rates.
- If your teen wants to feel normal (do what the majority does) help them understand that the majority of teens don't regularly use alcohol (61% don't) or marijuana (77% don't), so if they want to feel normal they shouldn't use.
- If you are concerned that your child has a substance use problem, seek professional help immediately.

Michael D. Zito, PhD is a licensed psychologist and owner of Morristown Clinical and Sport Psychology, with offices in Watchung and Morristown. In his clinical practice, he provides individual, marital, family and time, he taught Clinical and Sport Psychology classes and consulted with the university teams. He taught graduate clinical skills classes at the College of Saint Elizabeth starting in 2014. Dr. Zito has authored numerous book chapters and publications, related to a broad variety of clinical psychology topics as well as in the sport psychology field. He has appeared on Channel 9/Fox News and has made multiple radio appearances. His work was featured in SELF magazine. Dr. Zito can be reached at MichaelZitoPhD@yahoo.com or at www.MichaelDZitoPhD.com.