

Helping Your Teen Cope with Traumatic Stress and Substance Abuse

A Guide for Parents

About the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

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All parents wish that their children could go through life without experiencing any kind of pain or stress, but every day children around the world are exposed to potentially traumatic experiences: from natural disasters like hurricanes or earthquakes to man-made events such as car accidents, crime, or abuse. In the United States, for example:¹

- Four out of 10 adolescents have witnessed violence
- Seventeen percent have been physically assaulted
- Eight percent have experienced sexual assault

Sometimes teenagers who have experienced trauma turn to alcohol and drugs in an attempt to deal with overwhelming feelings about the event. When they do, they are more likely to become dependent on drugs or alcohol than teens who are not dealing with the effects of trauma.

This guide was created to help parents and caregivers who believe their teenagers might be experiencing problems as a result of traumatic stress and substance abuse. In it, you will find information about the connections between trauma and drug abuse, tips on how to help your teen cope with trauma and stay drug free, and where to go if your teen needs more help.

What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is one that threatens the life or physical/psychological integrity of a person or of someone critically important to him or her.

Examples of potentially traumatic events include:

- Natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, or tornadoes
- Accidents
- Acts of terrorism
- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Domestic violence
- Community violence such as drive-by shootings, riots, or school shootings
- Physical or sexual assault
- Traumatic loss, such as the murder of a parent or sibling, or the death of a parent or sibling in battle
- Serious medical illnesses

Some teens show few, if any, problems as a result of being involved in a traumatic event. Others who are faced with a traumatic event may experience intense physical and emotional responses, including an overwhelming sense of terror, helplessness, and horror, and physical sensations such as a pounding heart, trembling, dizziness, nausea, dry mouth and throat, and loss of bladder or bowel control. This traumatic stress response can lead to long-lasting problems, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What is PTSD?

PTSD is an intense emotional and physical response that can be triggered by reminders of the traumatic event. Symptoms are generally classified into four categories:

1. **Reexperiencing** the trauma: having nightmares, flashbacks, and physical or emotional responses to reminders of the event
2. **Avoidance** of things that are reminders of the trauma, including feelings, thoughts, people, places, or activities that might remind the teenager of the event
3. **Emotional numbing**, including having feelings of being outside of oneself or disconnected from others
4. **Increased arousal**, such as being easily startled, having outbursts of anger, having difficulty sleeping or concentrating, feeling increasingly irritable, or frequently being on guard for danger

How can I tell if my teenager has PTSD?

Research has shown that **children and adolescents who have experienced trauma are at particularly high risk of developing PTSD**: for example, more than 75% of kids who experience a school shooting develop PTSD.² Teens who are suffering from PTSD may express fear that the event will occur again, experience flashbacks and nightmares, go to great lengths to avoid things that remind them of the event, seem on edge all the time, and have trouble sleeping.

Teens who are dealing with PTSD may also start showing social problems such as getting into fights with their peers, avoiding school, or behaving in reckless and dangerous ways. They may try to avoid or defuse the intense feelings they are experiencing by acting out sexually, cutting themselves, bingeing and purging, or even attempt suicide. But arguably the most common unhealthy coping mechanism among traumatized teens is abuse of—or dependence on—alcohol or drugs.

What is the difference between substance abuse and dependence?

According to the American Psychiatric Association,³ substance abuse is a pattern of use in which a person continues to use drugs or alcohol in spite of very serious negative consequences. Drug-abusing teenagers may fail to fulfill major responsibilities, use drugs in situations that are physically dangerous to them, run into problems with the law, or have ongoing conflicts with friends or family.

Substance dependence —more commonly referred to as addiction—is a more dangerous pattern of use characterized by physical tolerance to the effects of drugs or alcohol (needing more to get the same effect) and the development of withdrawal symptoms when the teen tries to reduce or stop using.

Teens with substance dependence continue to use drugs or alcohol despite the increasingly dire consequences of their use. Other activities will fall by the wayside as more and more of the teen's activities revolve around drug or alcohol use. Because they often take increasingly higher doses to get the desired effect, teens with substance dependence are at a higher risk of drug or alcohol overdose, and are also at risk of developing potentially serious withdrawal symptoms when they try to stop using (See **Table 1**).

How can I tell if my teenager is using drugs or alcohol?



Experimentation with drugs and alcohol is common among teenagers: one national survey found that **nearly one in three (29%) adolescents has experimented with illegal drugs, and 41% have consumed alcohol by the time they finish 8th grade.**⁴

Because the teenage brain is still growing and changing, alcohol and drug use can have a profound effect on teens' normal brain development, particularly the areas of the brain responsible for learning, memory, critical thinking, planning, impulse control, and regulating emotion.^{5,6} Because drug and alcohol use impairs teens' ability to regulate their moods, teens with substance abuse problems tend to have higher rates of depression, aggression, violence and suicide than those who do not abuse drugs and alcohol.⁷

Some general signs that a teenager is involved with drugs or alcohol include:

- **Academic changes:** Dramatic drop in grades or in the ability or willingness to do school work, skipping school
- **Social changes:** Developing new friends but being unwilling to introduce them to family, lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities, decreased attention to physical appearance or cleanliness
- **Behavior changes:** More forgetful, distracted, jittery, or aggressive, secretive behavior (e.g., locking bedroom door, lying about where they go, sneaking out of the house), increase in borrowing money from family or friends, stealing money, dramatic changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- **Attitude changes:** Significant drop in motivation, withdrawal from responsibilities, being less cooperative

Table 1: Signs and Symptoms of Withdrawal

SUBSTANCE	WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS
Alcohol	Alcohol cravings, insomnia, vivid dreams, anxiety, hypervigilance, agitation, irritability, loss of appetite (including anorexia), nausea, vomiting, headache, sweating, tremors, tactile and auditory hallucinations, seizures, delirium tremens (a life-threatening withdrawal syndrome)
Marijuana, hashish	Irritability, anxiety and physical tension, decreases in appetite and mood
Cocaine (crack)	Agitation/irritability, depression, anxiety, intense cravings, angry outbursts, lack of motivation, fatigue, nausea/vomiting, shaking
GHB (date rape drug)	Profuse sweating, anxiety attacks, high blood pressure, hallucinations, rapid pulse
Inhalants (paint thinner, gasoline, glues, laughing gas, poppers, snappers, whippets)	Hand tremors, excess sweating, constant headaches, nervousness
MDMA (Ecstasy, X, XTC, etc.)	Depression, anxiety (including panic attacks), paranoid delusions, sleeplessness
Methamphetamine	Irritability, depression, anxiety, psychotic reactions
Opioids (codeine, fentanyl, heroin, morphine, opium, oxycodone, hydrocodone)	Nausea/vomiting, insomnia, diarrhea, irritability, loss of appetite, shaking, tremors, panic, chills or profuse sweating
<i>For more information about common drugs of abuse and their effects, see the Appendix</i>	

What is the connection between trauma and substance abuse?

Because alcohol and other drugs have such powerful effects on a teenager's emotional experience, teens who are dealing with trauma can quickly progress from recreational or occasional use to more serious patterns of abuse or dependence. Studies have shown that **more than half of young people with PTSD go on to develop substance abuse problems.**⁸⁻¹¹

For teens with PTSD, alcohol or drugs can at first seem to ease their distress. They can give teens pleasurable feelings or help them avoid the intense feelings that can follow stressful experiences. But in the long run, substance abuse can keep the teen in a cycle of avoidance and make it more difficult to recover from trauma. In order to overcome the distress associated with trauma, teenagers will need help in learning better ways to cope that do not result in additional health and social problems.

Substance abuse can also increase a teen's risk of becoming involved in traumatic events and experiencing traumatic stress symptoms. Teens who abuse drugs and alcohol are more likely to engage in risky activities such as driving under the influence, hitchhiking, or hanging out in unsafe neighborhoods, which can put them at risk of experiencing traumatic events such as victimization and injury.^{12, 13} Because of the many problems associated with alcohol and drug use, these teenagers may have a harder time being able to cope with traumatic events.¹⁴

Regardless of whether teenagers experienced traumatic stress or substance abuse first, it is clear that the negative effects of each of these problems only compound the effects of the other.

How can I help my teen deal with trauma?

If your son or daughter has experienced trauma, your support and care will be critical to his or her recovery. If the trauma is recurring or has the potential to recur, talk with your teen about ways to minimize the risk of future trauma. Remember, your top priority should be ensuring the safety and mental and physical health of your child.

Here are some other ways you can support your child during this difficult time:

- Some traumatic events can lead to fear, shame, and guilt. Encourage your teen to talk to you about the event, including the ways his or her life has been affected since the event happened, and the ways that things have remained the same. To help your teen resolve feelings of guilt, discuss how to more accurately tell the difference between things he or she is responsible for and things he or she is not.

- Adolescents exposed to trauma may feel self-conscious about their emotional reactions and worry about how these feelings make them different from their peers. Encourage your teen to express his or her feelings about the event to you. Be supportive and don't criticize.
- Help your teen work through feelings of unfairness, shame, guilt, anger, and revenge. Experiencing a traumatic event can cause a radical shift in the way a teen sees the world. Recognize that teens may "act out" or behave in self-destructive ways in an attempt to express their emotions. Helping your teen come up with constructive alternatives will lessen his or her feelings of helplessness.
- Learn to recognize your teen's reminders of the traumatic event, as they may lead to a loss of emotional or behavioral control. Be there to offer support when he or she is reminded of the event and becomes upset.
- If the event affected your whole family, be open about the strains it has placed on relationships between family members. Each person in your family will have experienced the event in a different way, with a different personal reaction. Be honest about your own difficulty with the event and get help for yourself if necessary.

How can I help my teen stay drug-free?

One of the most important things you can do to prevent your children from getting into drugs and alcohol is to be a good role model. Do not engage in illegal, unhealthy, or dangerous drug use. And if you do use alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs, don't involve your children in your use. For example, don't ask your teen to grab you a beer out of the fridge. Other ways you can support your teen include:

- **Offer encouragement and praise.** Let your teenager know that you have confidence in his or her ability to do things well, and that you're proud of him or her. Whenever your teen exhibits good behavior, praise him or her immediately.
- **Talk to your teen;** not just about drugs and alcohol, but about every aspect of his or her life. Ask your teen about things that are going well and things he or she might be having a hard time with.
- **Focus on school and the community.** Look for after-school activities your teen could get involved in. Communicate with his or her school board, principal, teachers, and counselors, and advocate for your teen to get the best education

possible. Help your teenager realize that what he or she learns in school will be useful later in life.

- **Get involved in your teen's life.** Take the time to be a part of the activities your teen is involved in by attending games and performances. Find at least one opportunity each week for you and your teen to do something special together. Use some of that time to talk about whether his or her friends use drugs or alcohol.
- **Set—and enforce—clear rules.** Discuss why using drugs and alcohol is not acceptable in your family. Set your rules and expectations in advance, because rules do not work after the fact. If a rule is broken, follow through with the consequences that you've established immediately and consistently. When your teenager does follow the rules, make sure to acknowledge it and praise him or her for it.

How can I get more help for my teen?

If you suspect that your son or daughter has experienced a traumatic event or may be using drugs or alcohol, be sure to talk to your teenager and seek support, and keep the following in mind:

- **Remain calm and be specific about your concerns.** It can be helpful to express your love for your teen, explain that you feel worried, and that you want to listen to him or her. Let your teen know that you will be part of the solution, and that you are there to offer help and support.
- **Seek support from the school and your community.** Get in touch with teachers and school counselors to find out how your son or daughter is doing. Your teen's pediatrician, school counselor, or spiritual leader can help you identify mental health and substance abuse counselors and resources in your area.
- **Consult national databases.** Look on the Internet for information on the subjects discussed in this guide as well as for referrals to sources you can turn to in your own community.
- **Educate yourself.** Seek out information from other reputable sources. A partial list of resources is included in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Additional Resources

FINDING TREATMENT	
The Center for Mental Health Services Mental Health Services Locator	http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases/
The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator	http://dasis3.samhsa.gov/Default.aspx
SAMHSA’s Family Guide to Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy and Drug Free	http://www.family.samhsa.gov/get/treatment.aspx
INFORMATION ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE	
National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): Information for Parents and Teachers	http://www.nida.nih.gov/parent-teacher.html
Adolescent Substance Abuse Knowledge Base	http://www.adolescent-substance-abuse.com/
Parents. The Anti-Drug.	http://www.theantidrug.com/
National Youth Network: Teen Substance Abuse	http://www.nationalyouth.com/substanceabuse.html
INFORMATION ON TRAUMA	
SAMHSA’s National Mental Health Information Center	http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp
National Child Traumatic Stress Network	http://www.nctsn.org
National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): Children and Violence	http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health/children-and-violence.shtml
National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder	http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/index.jsp

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Appendix: Common Drugs of Abuse and Their Effects ¹⁵⁻¹⁷

SUBSTANCE	NAMES	SIGNS OF INTOXICATION	HEALTH CONSEQUENCES*
Alcohol	<i>Booze, brew, hooch, sauce, forty, brewsky, hard stuff, hard A, liquor, spirits, various brand names</i>	<i>Relaxation, decreased concentration, impaired judgment, coordination, and reaction time, loss of consciousness, blackouts, and memory lapses</i>	<i>Liver disease, ulcers, cancer (esophageal, oral, liver), high blood pressure, low blood sugar, life-threatening withdrawal syndrome (delirium tremens)</i>
Amphetamines	<i>Biphetamine, Dexedrine: bennies, black beauties, crosses, hearts, LA turnaround, speed, truck drivers, uppers</i>	<i>Increased heart rate, blood pressure, and metabolism, feelings of exhilaration, energy, increased mental alertness, rapid breathing</i>	<i>Rapid or irregular heartbeat, reduced appetite, weight loss, nervousness, insomnia, tremor, loss of coordination, irritability, anxiousness, restlessness, delirium, panic, paranoia, impulsive behavior, aggressiveness, psychosis, heart failure</i>
Barbiturates	<i>Amytal, Nembutal, Seconal, Phenobarbital: barbs, reds, red birds, phennies, tooies, yellows, yellow jackets</i>	<i>Reduced anxiety, feeling of well-being, lowered inhibitions, slowed pulse and breathing, lowered blood pressure, poor concentration, sedation, drowsiness</i>	<i>Fatigue, confusion, depression, unusual excitement, fever, irritability, poor judgment, slurred speech, dizziness, respiratory depression and arrest, life-threatening withdrawal</i>
Benzodiazepines	<i>Ativan, Halcion, Librium, Valium, Xanax: candy, downers, sleeping pills, tranks</i>	<i>Reduced anxiety, feeling of well-being, lowered inhibitions, slowed pulse and breathing, lowered blood pressure, poor concentration, sedation, drowsiness</i>	<i>Dizziness, fatigue, confusion, impaired coordination, memory, judgment, respiratory depression and arrest</i>
Cocaine	<i>Cocaine hydrochloride: blow, bump, C, candy, Charlie, coke, crack, flake, rock, snow, toot</i>	<i>Increased heart rate, blood pressure, and metabolism, feelings of exhilaration, increased energy, increased mental alertness, increased temperature</i>	<i>Rapid or irregular heart beat, reduced appetite, weight loss, nervousness, insomnia, chest pain, heart failure, respiratory failure, nausea, abdominal pain, strokes, seizures, headaches, malnutrition, panic attacks</i>

Codeine	<i>Empirin with Codeine, Fiorinal with Codeine, Robitussin A-C, Tylenol with Codeine:</i> Captain Cody, Cody, schoolboy (with glutethimide), doors & fours, loads, pancakes and syrup	Pain relief, euphoria, drowsiness. Less analgesia, sedation, and respiratory depression than morphine	Nausea, constipation, confusion, sedation, respiratory depression and arrest, unconsciousness, coma, death
Flunitrazepam[†]	<i>Rohypnol:</i> forget-me pill, Mexican Valium, R2, Roche, roofies, roofinol, rope, rophies	Reduced anxiety, feeling of well-being, lowered inhibitions, slowed pulse and breathing, lowered blood pressure, poor concentration	Visual and gastrointestinal disturbances, urinary retention, memory loss for the time under the drug's effects, fatigue, confusion, impaired coordination, memory, and judgment, respiratory depression and arrest
GHB[†]	Gamma-hydroxybutyrate: G, Georgia home boy, grievous bodily harm, liquid ecstasy	Reduced anxiety, feeling of well-being, lowered inhibitions, slowed pulse and breathing, lowered blood pressure, poor concentration, drowsiness, nausea	Vomiting, headache, loss of consciousness, loss of reflexes, seizures, coma, death
Hashish	Boom, chronic, gangster, hash, hash oil, hemp	Euphoria, slowed thinking and reaction time, confusion, impaired balance and coordination	Cough, frequent respiratory infections, impaired memory and learning, increased heart rate, anxiety, panic attacks
Inhalants	Solvents (paint thinners, gasoline, glues), gases (butane, propane, aerosol propellants, nitrous oxide), laughing gas, poppers, snappers, whippets	Stimulation, loss of inhibition, headache, nausea or vomiting, slurred speech, loss of motor coordination, wheezing	Unconsciousness, cramps, weight loss, muscle weakness, depression, memory impairment, damage to cardiovascular and nervous systems, sudden death
Ketamine	<i>Ketalar SV:</i> cat Valiums, K, Special K, vitamin K	Increased heart rate and blood pressure, impaired motor function. At high doses, delirium, depression, respiratory depression and arrest	Memory loss, numbness, nausea, vomiting

LSD	Lysergic acid diethylamide: acid, blotter, boomers, cubes, microdot, yellow sunshines	Altered states of perception and feeling, nausea, increased body temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, numbness, weakness, tremors, persistent mental disorders	Persisting perception disorder (flashbacks)
Marijuana	Blunt, dope, ganja, grass, herb, joints, Mary Jane, pot, reefer, sinsemilla, skunk, weed	Euphoria, slowed thinking and reaction time, confusion, impaired balance and coordination	Cough, frequent respiratory infections, impaired memory and learning, increased heart rate, anxiety, panic attacks
MDMA	Adam, clarity, ecstasy, Eve, lover's speed, peace, STP, X, XTC	Mild hallucinogenic effects, increased tactile sensitivity, empathetic feelings, increased heart rate, blood pressure, metabolism, feelings of exhilaration, energy, increased mental alertness	Rapid or irregular heartbeat, reduced appetite, weight loss, nervousness, insomnia, cardiac toxicity, impaired memory and learning, hyperthermia, renal failure, liver toxicity
Mescaline	Buttons, cactus, mesc, peyote	Altered states of perception and feeling, nausea, increased body temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, numbness, weakness, tremors	Persisting perception disorder (flashbacks)
Methamphetamine	<i>Desoxyn</i> : chalk, crank, crystal, fire, glass, go fast, ice, meth, speed	Aggression, violence, psychotic behavior, increased heart rate, blood pressure, metabolism, feelings of exhilaration, energy, increased mental alertness	Memory loss, cardiac and neurological damage, dental decay and damage, impaired memory and learning
Methylphenidate	<i>Ritalin</i> : JIF, MPH, R-ball, Skippy, the smart drug, vitamin R	Increased heart rate, blood pressure, metabolism, feelings of exhilaration, energy, increased mental alertness	Rapid or irregular heart beat, reduced appetite, weight loss, nervousness, insomnia, heart failure

Morphine	<i>Roxanol, Duramorph: M, Miss Emma, monkey, white stuff</i>	Pain relief, euphoria, drowsiness	Nausea, constipation, confusion, sedation, respiratory depression and arrest, unconsciousness, coma, death
Opium	<i>Laudanum, paregoric: big O, black stuff, block, gum, hop</i>		
Oxycodone HCL	OxyContin: Oxy, O.C., killer		
PCP	Phencyclidine: angel dust, boat, hog, love boat, peace pill	Increased heart rate and blood pressure, impaired motor function, possible decrease in blood pressure and heart rate, panic, aggression, violence	Memory loss, numbness, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, depression
Psilocybin	Magic mushroom, purple passion, 'shrooms	Altered states of perception and feeling, nausea, nervousness, paranoia	Persisting perception disorder (flashbacks)

*All substances listed are associated with tolerance and withdrawal
†Often used in sexual assaults