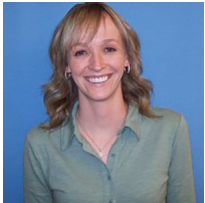


CDC report finds teens use drugs to ease stress, anxiety

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
Friday, 29 March 2024 00:00



GMCS counselors HELP students face substance abuse problems

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a study on Feb. 8 that stated teenagers with suspected substance use problems say they turn to drugs because of a need to relax and escape worries.

Nearly three-quarters of students surveyed —73%— said they used drugs or alcohol “to feel mellow, calm, or relaxed.” Forty-four percent used drugs, such as marijuana, as sleep aids.

The same percentage cited drug use as a way to “stop worrying about a problem or forget bad memories.” And 40% said they used substances to cope with depression or anxiety.

CLOSE TO HOME

In an interview with the *Sun*, Gallup-McKinley County Schools's Coordinator for Counseling and General Education Faith Kline explained how the district's counselors try to help students who may struggle with a substance abuse disorder.

A student with a substance abuse problem may be referred to a counselor by a teacher, parent, fellow student, or sometimes even the student with the problem may come in.

The counselors evaluate the student's individual needs and decide if they would benefit from talking with a small group of students who are dealing with a similar situation or one-on-one counseling.

Counseling often involves teaching the student coping mechanisms that don't have them relying on drugs or alcohol to make themselves feel less stressed and anxious.

Some common coping mechanisms counselors recommend when dealing with stress and anxiety include:

- Daily exercise
- Eating well-balanced meals
- Getting enough sleep

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- Practice breathing exercises
- Find a sport or hobby you enjoy
- Find a new group of friends who support a healthier lifestyle, one without drugs or alcohol

Kline said the counselors take a look at each student they interact with and assess their individual needs.

“If we have a student who has experienced trauma around drugs and alcohol, we have to say to them, ‘OK, even though you’ve experienced this, what’s another coping mechanism that leads to a better result than drugs or alcohol?’ Let’s think about something besides drugs and alcohol that we can put our time and effort into to have better success or to make better choices in the friends or company that we keep,” she said.

The counselors also work with students throughout the district by teaching students from every grade level age-appropriate information about drugs and alcohol and the negative effects they have on people both mentally and physically.

Kline said different schools have varying needs, but they tailor presentations and information to fit the students’ needs. Topics of discussion can include how to handle peer pressure, how to build healthy relationships that don’t depend on drugs and alcohol, and general healthy habits.

DRUGS IN THE COMMUNITY

In an article published in the *Sun* on March 8, GMCS Superintendent Mike Hyatt addressed the New Mexico Department of Health's 2023 decision to test high school wastewater around the state for drugs.

Traces of multiple substances were found with the testing at GMCS schools, but Hyatt argued that the results didn't necessarily reflect students' drug use.

"I don't think it's surprising that there are people who might have drugs in their systems in our communities, but you can't really narrow it down to where it came from [with this testing]," Hyatt said.

He said that with basketball season going on in December, many different people visited the school campuses around the time of the testing.

"It could be one person who took the drug over the weekend and went to the bathroom [at one of the GMCS schools]. It could be an adult at a game. You can't narrow this down. It's not like this was just students," Hyatt said.

At a Feb. 26 school board meeting Hyatt noted that the district conducts occasional anonymous surveys that ask students about their drug use.

Additionally, Kline said the surveys have been very insightful, and that she believes the students are honest when they fill them out.

"I still think just like with anything, whether it be academics or the drugs and alcohol abuse, there's always those few students who we really try to catch who are falling through the cracks that maybe that survey doesn't pick up, but in my opinion, I do feel like we've seen pretty honest feedback from kids," she said. "The good thing about the survey is it is anonymous, so I feel like

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that does help students feel like they can be honest in the feedback.”

She added that anonymity helps and if the students had to identify themselves, even if it was just with their student ID numbers, the honesty could potentially disappear.

GMCS’S RULES REGARDING DRUG USE

According to the GMCS 2023-2024 student handbook, students are not allowed to use, distribute, or sell alcohol, tobacco products, drugs, and other mind-altering substances or medication while at school, on school property, at a school-sponsored event, or on school transportation.

If a student is caught with drugs or alcohol on school property, it is considered a serious infraction.

The handbook also states that the district can handle the situation in a couple different ways depending on if the student is a repeat offender or not.

If the situation is severe enough or if the student is a repeat offender, a disciplinary hearing will be held. A disciplinary hearing gives the student due process, which allows them to learn of the charges they face.

During a hearing, the Hearing Authority may recommend the student participate in substance abuse counseling outside of the district. If the situation is severe enough, they may even

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suspend or expel the student.

Kline said the district has seen fewer disciplinary hearings regarding drug use in the past year, and she believes part of that is due to the way her counselors try to help students.

“We are aware of some needs and areas in which we can improve, but I think we’ve got a really good handle on supporting students in a vast majority of things, but in particular with the drug and alcohol concerns,” she said. “I really think school counselors and social workers have bridged the gap and are working better together as well. We’re not so much working in silos anymore, we’re definitely trying to consult with each other more and give the kids all the support that we can.”

As someone who grew up in Gallup, Kline said her work helping students and helping stop any generational trauma surrounding drugs and alcohol makes her feel like she is doing something worthwhile.

“... As someone from this community I love to see us grow and trend in a very positive direction. [It’s all about] investing in our youth and ensuring that we give them all the support necessary with all the information that is out there. ...,” she said. “It’s not always about academics, It’s about them as people and who they’re going to be when they grow up and the type of relationships they develop and the lives that they lead.”

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