



The Mental Health Association in New York State (MHANYS) commends the Governor for establishing the Heroin Task Force in order to combat the State's heroin and opioid addiction crisis. MHANYS offers two policy recommendations toward this effort:

Recommendation 1. Update New York's Education Law (with regard to school health curricula) to reflect the current understanding of the relationship between mental health and substance use disorders. Current law requires instruction in "alcohol, drugs and tobacco", but fails to account for a primary reason people begin to use substances and develop addictions to them.

The use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco and substances does not occur in a vacuum. The "just say no" approach to ameliorating substance use and abuse among young people in the absence of a broader understanding of the link with mental health does a great disservice to youth because it perpetuates the idea that young people begin to use substances primarily for recreational use and/or because of peer pressure. In reality, we now understand that much substance abuse is related to people, usually unknowingly, attempting to "self-treat" or "self-medicate" the symptoms of undiagnosed mental illness. Consider the following:

- Epidemiologic studies conducted in the past 15 years demonstrate that many psychiatric disorders and substance use disorders co-occur far more commonly than would be expected by chance alone. In the Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study, an estimated 45% of individuals with an alcohol use disorder and 72% of individuals with a drug use disorder had a least one co-occurring psychiatric disorder.
- 60 percent of people who abuse drugs and/or alcohol also have some form of psychiatric disorder.

And, according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA):

- Patients with mood or anxiety disorders are about twice as likely to also suffer from a drug disorder.
- Patients with drug disorders are roughly twice as likely to be diagnosed with mood or anxiety disorders.
- Health care systems tend to treat substance abuse and mental illness separately. Physicians often treat patients with mental illnesses, whereas a mix of providers with varying backgrounds deliver drug abuse treatment. The same disconnect is unfortunately mirrored in the way we teach young people about substances and addictions, completely ignoring the role of mental health.

...working to ensure available and accessible mental health services to all New Yorkers

Recommendation 2. Public training in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) helps people recognize early signs and symptoms of mental health problems including substance use disorders. This 8-hour, evidence-based training is a “first-responder” approach to teaching students how to recognize and respond to substance use disorders and other mental health disorders, as well as crises and how to help people access appropriate treatment and/or rehabilitation. The training emphasizes the interrelationship between all mental disorders, including substance use disorders, the misuse of substances and the development of addictions that frequently result from attempts to “self-medicate” untreated mental health conditions. The training is appropriate for anyone 18 years of age and older and comes in various formats that target specific populations including a specialized version for people who regularly engage youth, such as teachers, parents and youth leaders.