



Why School Health Curricula Should Include Mental Health Instruction Along With the Required Instruction in Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco

Legislative Issue Brief – 2016

For decades the New York State Education Law has required that elementary, junior high and senior high schools teach about alcohol, drugs and tobacco abuse as part of the health curriculum. Considering everything we now know about the comorbidity of substance use and mental illness it no longer makes sense to teach about alcohol, drugs and tobacco without concurrently teaching about mental health.

MHANYS is calling upon the legislature to update New York's education law to reflect current knowledge about the linkages between the misuse of alcohol, tobacco and substances and mental health, by including instruction about mental health in school health curricula.

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:

- Several epidemiologic survey studies conducted in the past 15 years have demonstrated 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.
- In the National Co-Morbidity Study (NCS), probably the best known of the recent survey studies, it was found that approximately 78% of alcohol-dependent men and 86% of alcohol-dependent women met criteria for another psychiatric disorder, including drug dependence and antisocial personality disorder.
- 60 percent of people who abuse drugs and/or alcohol also have some form of psychiatric disorder. Particular conditions found in association with drugs or alcohol include depressive disorders and anxiety disorders (which also happen to be the most prevalent mental disorders).

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Further, according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA):

- individuals with psychiatric disorders purchase approximately 44 percent of all cigarettes sold in the United States
- In young smokers, the behavior appears to be strongly associated with increased risk for a variety of mental disorders.
- In clinical samples, the rate of smoking in patients with schizophrenia has ranged as high as 90 percent.

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.
- The high rate of comorbid substance abuse and mental illness points to the need for a comprehensive approach that identifies, evaluates, and simultaneously treats both disorders.
- The health care systems in place to treat substance abuse and mental illness are typically disconnected, hence inefficient. Physicians tend to treat patients with mental illnesses, whereas a mix of providers with varying backgrounds deliver drug abuse treatment.

The same disconnect in our health care system and our treatment approaches to mental health and substance use disorders (what we now refer to collectively as behavioral health) is unfortunately mirrored in the way we teach young people about substances and addictions, completely ignoring the role of mental health.

Recommendation: Amend State Education Law with respect to school health curricula to enhance the existing requirement regarding instruction in alcohol, drugs and tobacco to incorporate the interrelationship between mental health and the misuse of, and addiction to, alcohol, drugs and tobacco, including a greater emphasis on highly addictive and potentially lethal drugs including opioids.

For more information on the legislative initiative to include mental health instruction in school health curricula, please contact John Richter, Director of Public Policy, MHANYS at 518-434-0439, ext. 229