



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK

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## PARENT NETWORK UPDATE

JANUARY 2018

### WELLNESS SUMMIT

#### *Youth Mental Health: the Impact of Alcohol & Marijuana*

According to the latest statistics from Brookline's Student Health Survey, depression and anxiety among BHS teens have never been higher. Alcohol and marijuana are playing a big part in the ways teens are trying to cope, and current attitudes and perceptions are contributing to the problem. On December 14, the Brookline community came together for a summit addressing this important issue. Prevention/Intervention specialist in the Brookline schools Mary Minott illuminated some of the survey's most pertinent statistics, and a speaker from "Minding Your Mind" shared his personal story. Brainstorming sessions with student Peer Leaders, parents, teachers, PSBMA staff, community leaders and youth serving experts strategized what role we as a community can play in shifting the current culture.

### THOUGHTS FROM THE HEADMASTER

BHS Headmaster Anthony Meyer introduced the summit, stressing that **community problems require community solutions** and the importance of **getting ahead of issues**. He believes we are behind on addressing marijuana, with youth knowing more about marijuana usage than we do, with vaping providing easy access. He says the summit "...is about listening to our young people to try to better understand what's going on."

### ASSESSING THE SITUATION

Mary Minott offered a glimpse of cogent data from the *Student Health Survey*, with key findings including:

- **Alcohol use** -- 30% of students reported using alcohol in the past 30 days and 18% of all students reported binge drinking (5 or more drinks of alcohol in a row within a couple of hours).
- **Marijuana use** -- 25% of students reported that they had ever used marijuana products, and 13% of seniors had used during the school day.
- There is an epidemic of **vaping** at BHS in bathrooms, hallways, outside the building. The e-cigarette devices (especially the tiny juul pens) are accessible and easy to hide during the school day. Kids think it looks cool and are intrigued by the special flavors. These devices can be loaded with both tobacco and marijuana products, so vaping blurs boundaries making it hard for adults to know whether a student is using nicotine or some form of THC. Kids are often using vapes to smoke marijuana to self-medicate. (YouTube offers some rather shocking videos on how to hide usage at school, get the biggest buzz, etc.)
- The big concern with substance use is how it reflects and/or feeds into **mental health issues**, which are increasing. At BHS, 29% of students report symptoms of depression, and nearly half of those students reported recent binge drinking and marijuana use. Social workers throughout the system are dealing with crisis situations almost every day.
- The earlier teens use any substance, the greater the **risk of addiction**, but the recent legalization of marijuana contributes to the **perception that "it's no big deal,"** despite scientific evidence of damage to the **developing brain**.

(A full report from the *Student Health Survey* will be available soon at [www.B-PEN.org](http://www.B-PEN.org).)

### GUEST SPEAKER CARL ANTISELL, FROM "MINDING YOUR MIND"

Speaker Carl Antisell from "Minding Your Mind" shared his powerful personal story of anxiety disorder, addiction and recovery, sharing how a kid from the suburbs who crushes his SATs became a homeless

young man on the street addicted to heroin through “a thousand little steps.” He traced a journey that began with crippling anxiety in grade school that went largely unaddressed. He didn’t have the words to express his feelings, so he masked his anxiety with anger, and it progressed in high school into curiosity with alcohol and drug experimentation as a way to fit in, developing into drug addiction by college for self-medicating, and it rewired his brain, making it difficult to make the informed smart choices to get help. His takeaway points:

- Data important as way to rationalize and be informed, but addiction is a very **human experience**
- The stories we tell end when people hit bottom, but there are **a thousand little steps** to get to that point – social anxiety, being bullied, masking depression with anger, etc.
- Mental health struggles feel unique, isolating, though **one in four** has struggled with mental health disorder
- Being **proactive** is critical
- We can’t avoid stress and anxiety (which can be a positive motivating force), but we can learn **constructive ways to navigate and cope**
- We need to **counteract stigma with openness** – hidden shame, fear and self-hate are hard to overcome, feelings that stay locked away soon become overwhelming
- **Mental addiction leads to physical addiction**, dependence on drugs to feel better put you in pain when you don’t have them. It plays a trick on the brain, and once you are physically addicted, you are unable to make informed smart decisions, so it becomes a cycle.
- Suicidal thought often comes from having **no hope and no connections** – it’s not the desire to die but the desire for the pain to end, so its important to remember that even though today is bad tomorrow can get better
- Therapy can be transformative, reframing **asking for help as empowerment**, not weakness. Just as Olympians need a coach to be the best in world, a therapist’s expertise can guide a shift in thinking to not run away, but work through issues to overcome and grow. Alcohol and marijuana abuse are symptoms of something deeper.
- Foundation of positive coping is finding **connection, community, purpose** with a passion. Help create those moments, rather than focus on consequences of troubling behavior.
- Helps to **focus** on something other than anxiety, like breathing, mindfulness,
- Have **conversations earlier** about anxiety, stress management, etc. in the same way you have about academics, sex, etc.
- Cross-community conversation about mental health are vital

## MESSAGING

**Messages: Groups were asked to think about messaging to raise awareness of the connection between mental health and substance use**

- “Be More Present” campaign that encourages we put down cellphones and engage directly with each other, less texting, more conversation
- Promote communication that is “consistent, persistent, open, honest, and direct” without fear of consequences
- Anxiety and depression are on a continuum
- Push back against stigma, and normalize access to support
- Explore and publicize effective coping skills for students
- Provide practical steps if a student is in an unsafe or uncomfortable situation – help devise a plan to get home without judgment (text parent, code word, Uber account, etc.)
- Foster information on early recognition, the “soft” signs of possible mental health issues
- Spread information to parents and kids much earlier in K-8, and provide practical language for conversations with younger kids

## ACTION POINTS

**To Do: Groups were asked to come up with personal action steps**

- Foster parent networking – no one is in it alone, confronting similar issues
- Help counteract parent denial (“not my kid”) with non-judgmental communication
- Initiate conversations with kids about substance use and share family values

- Host story sharing and informational sessions for parents
- Be more honest and vulnerable with kids about parents' own stories
- Have more conversations about anxiety and depression, especially with kids
- Start early with mental health/substance use education and integrate into science curriculum
- Stress asking for help is strength not weakness
- Be more direct
- Push back against stigma
- Get to the "why" behind troubling behaviors
- Teach students how to "swim" or navigate the waters of legal marijuana
- Get teachers thinking about issues, help them understand red flags
- School committee focusing on wellness as overall goal, putting that and social/emotional growth first
- Engage in conversation with others who may be struggling – keep in mind there are many different faces of mental health issues
- Dispel worries about confidentiality, especially re: college. Confidential help is available.
- "Day of Mental Health" – more on just facts of mental health

## NEED SOME HELP?

Brookline is fortunate to have public health social workers who specialize in adolescent substance use and mental health, Mary Minott and Kendell Jones at x5155 or in room 149. Resources to support children with a range of issues also include deans and school-based guidance counselors and social workers. For additional helpful information on navigating common social, emotional and developmental challenges, including tips and resources, visit

[www.B-PEN.org](http://www.B-PEN.org)

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