

Black And White Reality

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Is life so stressful and depressing that one resorts to sniffing household items for a quick escape from reality? Do we have alternative strategies to manage with life issues, and if so, are we teaching our young ones appropriately?

Drug abuse is a real and growing menace worldwide, with teenagers fast falling prey to deadly habits.

Contrary to the notion, drugs and substances of abuse are not always found in the dingy back alleys of the city. Our neighbourhood shops, supermarkets, hardware stores, paint stores, dairies and service stations are selling legal everyday products that our children have easy access to and some even abuse them.

Who are affected?

Children as young as 6-8 years are reported to have experimented with solvents, but it is known that early to mid teens (13 -15 years) commonly abuse it, with reduced frequency in late teens.

Fortunately, most solvent abusers outgrow the habit before adulthood, with exception of those developing psychological dependency leading to ongoing usage in adulthood. For some people, volatile substance abuse is a passing phase and for others it can become a long-term addiction.

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Solvents That Are Abused

- ◆ Paints
- ◆ Paint thinners
- ◆ Whiteners
- ◆ Nail polish removers
- ◆ Glue
- ◆ Cleaning fluids
- ◆ Turpentine
- ◆ Gasoline

stations. Young boys and girls from well-to-do families are indulging in such forms of abuse. One of the reasons is that it is cheaply and easily available.

Desired And Unwanted Effects Of Solvents

Solvents are abused by purposefully breathing in gas or vapours to experience a high. Typically, the method of abusing solvent is called bagging, sniffing or huffing.

When inhaled, solvents have a similar effect to alcohol, making the person feel euphoric and uninhibited. Effects can vary from behavioural changes to mood swings to suicidal tendencies. Worryingly, it causes dizziness and blackouts, as well as spasms in breathing and sudden stopping of the heart leading to fatality.

Inhaling solvents can be addictive and dangerous, mainly, as it is difficult to control the dose. All solvents are potentially fatal, even on a one-time use.

Why take such odd substances?

Apart from easy accessibility and cheap high, solvents are taken under peer pressure and for sheer experimental purpose. Many simply take it out of boredom, whilst others for psychological reasons emanating from stress.

Adolescence and young adulthood can be a stressful time, when one has to deal with the challenges of going through puberty, meeting expectations, moving from school to university, adapting to peer pressure and coping with new feelings and relationships. Academic pressure is one of the main causes of mental stress in this group, which can be internally induced by the fear of failure or externally imposed through family and society by imparting a sense of shame and guilt associated with lack of success. Although, most

Things To Lookout For In Your Child

Remember, teenage is a time of change and adaptation, therefore can present with mood changes and behavioural variation. However, an unremitting picture should warn you about possible substance and even alcohol misuse.

The following may be indicators that a child is abusing solvents:

- ◆ Look for changes in appearance and behaviour, characterised by neglected dirty clothing with smell of chemicals on it.
- ◆ Mood swings or changes in behaviour are a part of growing up as teens, but here it will be enhanced and consistent.
- ◆ Appearing drunk when alcohol consumption is unlikely should ring alarm bells.
- ◆ Isolative demeanour, sudden changes in friends circle with hangouts in secluded places may warrant exploration.
- ◆ Sleep and appetite can be markedly disturbed.
- ◆ Frequent sniffing or runny nose, with rashes and pimples around nose and mouth can be a sign of abuse.

deal with this stress in an adaptive manner – by talking things through and seeking family support, others resort to alcohol and deadly drugs, which can complicate matters.

Intervention

Don't panic even if you suspect your child or someone you know is abusing solvents. Be calm and supportive while keeping a close eye on their whereabouts and friends. Try talking to them alone and confidentially and offer unconditional support. Discuss issues

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of peer pressure and assertiveness. If you have a good relationship with your children then they will approach you first with their problems.

Talking to independent healthcare professionals, especially a psychiatrist, can be helpful for planning health and social investigations and initiate medical and psychological treatment. Few sessions of supportive psychotherapy and education about the perils of substance misuse can bring lasting change in one's perception, coping strategies and resistance skills. Do not underestimate a child's ability to take advice and change.

In some cases, the mood swings may be explained by an underlying mood disorder like depression or bipolar illness. Such illnesses may be inherited or triggered due to reasons such as:

- ◆ Academic pressure
- ◆ Bullying
- ◆ Harassment
- ◆ Interpersonal problems
- ◆ Abuse

Specialist evaluation is essential in such cases.

Remember, drug abuse and addiction destroys lives, tears apart families and harms society. Efforts to stop it will never go futile.