

# Tips for Responding to Mental Health Concerns During Project Amp Sessions



**A**s a Project Amp mentor, you will serve as a sounding board and support for students in many ways. Substance use may not be the only risk factor present in the lives of students, although it is the primary focus of Project Amp. Young people face anxiety, depression, high stress levels, and other mental health challenges at increasing rates. These issues may be precursors to substance use, or occur at the same time.

## Co-Occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Conditions

In 2018, approximately 1.5 percent of adolescents (or 358,000) had a co-occurring substance use disorder (SUD) and a major depressive episode (MDE) in the past year (SAMHSA, 2019, p.44). While it is not always possible to pinpoint causality or the chronology of mental health symptoms, adolescents may engage in early use of alcohol and other drugs as a way to cope with these experiences or to try to feel “normal.” In 2018, almost a third of adolescents who experienced a MDE in the past year used illicit drugs, compared to 14 percent for those without an MDE. This trend continued across all substance groups (SAMHSA, 2019, pp.44-45). There is also an established link between childhood attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other externalizing disorders (especially when left untreated) and the development of SUD (Harstad et al., 2014; Wilens et al., 2011). Up to 50% of adolescents living with a SUD experience co-occurring internalizing disorders such as anxiety and

*“My emotional feelings led to my drug use, but drug use led to a lot of mental health problems down the road, so it’s like **that vicious cycle they talk about**, one thing leads to another.”*

— Youth Focus Group Participant (National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health, 2001)

depression, in addition to trauma-related symptoms and other mood disorders (Bukstein & Horner, 2010; Hulvershorn et al., 2015; O’Neill et al., 2015). By some reports, the prevalence of comorbidity is even greater, and the rates of mental health concerns among adolescents with SUD are significantly higher than the general adolescent population (Hoffman et al., 2004; Lubman et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2005).

Given how common mental health concerns are among adolescents engaging in substance use, it is important to be prepared to respond. This tip sheet offers some helpful suggestions and resources in your role as a Project Amp mentor.



## How to Respond to Mental Health Concerns as a Project Amp Mentor

### Setting Expectations

*Avoid future misunderstandings by explaining the boundaries of confidentiality within the context of your role as a mentor.*

- Before beginning any Project Amp sessions, ensure you understand mandated reporting requirements as well as any other specific confidentiality limits that might be enforced by your agency or the school.
  - Remember to always be transparent with students about the limits of confidentiality. This transparency will help you if and when the time comes where you need to connect a student with a clinical support person, either through your agency or the school.
- Ask some supportive follow-up questions to better understand what the student is experiencing, and so that you can debrief with your supervisor with the facts. For example:
    - » How long has this behavior/feeling/thought pattern been going on?
    - » How often does the behavior/feeling/thought pattern occur?
    - » How distressing/disturbing/upsetting is it? In what ways is it interfering in your life?
    - » In what ways are you coping or managing?
    - » What would you like to do about it right now, if anything?

### Responding Thoughtfully

*Avoid overreacting; It is good that the student shared their concerns with you, and you want to be affirming of this by remaining calm, non-judgmental, trauma-informed, and matter of fact.*

- Thank the student for being open with you about their challenges and affirm that it is important to recognize when you are not feeling yourself, and to seek help.
  - Remind them that you are not a mental health expert, but there to support them and if needed, get them connected to the right supports.
- Confirm if the student would like immediate help and/or whether they would be open to talking with someone else.
  - Be transparent about the fact that you may be sharing some of this feedback with your supervisor, to see what other supports might be available or suggested.

### Taking Action with Respectful Intention

*Engage in shared decision making, to the extent possible, when determining the next steps. Remember that just because a person is experiencing distressing symptoms, this does not mean they are experiencing a mental health crisis.*

- Confirm when you will talk again — whether it is the next Amp session or another touchpoint as a follow-up.
- Speak with your supervisor about what came up in the session and how best to respond. Decide together if the student needs an additional level of support, assessment, or further intervention beyond what you can provide as a Project Amp mentor. This might also mean a call to the parents which should be coordinated with your supervisor and/or a clinical or school personnel member, and the student should be notified.



**Remember:** If a student does require separate clinical support to address a mental health issue, this does not necessarily mean you have to stop Project Amp sessions. In fact, continuing with a substance use prevention or early intervention program like Amp may be a helpful outlet and support mechanism while addressing other mental health challenges.

## Mental Health Hotlines and Information for Youth

### **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)**

#### **Student Guide to Mental Health and Hotline:**

800-950-NAMI. Students can also visit [OK2Talk.org](https://www.ok2talk.org) to connect with other young people managing mental health challenges.

**Lines for Life YOUTHLINE:** 877-968-8491 or Text teen2teen to 839863 or Chat at

[www.oregonyouthline.org](https://www.oregonyouthline.org)

A teen-to-teen crisis and help line.

**Trevor Project Lifeline:** 866-488-7386 or visit

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org>

Confidential hotline for LGBT youth

**TeenLine:** (310) 855-HOPE (4673) or (800) TLC-TEEN (852-8336) Or text TEEN to 839863

6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Pacific Time, every night.

<https://teenlineonline.org>



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