

A Troubling Trend: Why Teens Turn to Prescription Drugs

In their quest for independence, teens embark on a road of self discovery, constantly comparing themselves to their peers and pushing the limits of their independence. The teen years can be traumatic for some kids. And because the teen brain is not yet fully developed, their judgment and ability to make sound decisions is not as good as they (or you) might think.

Taken together, it's no wonder teens are prone to a variety of risk-taking behaviors. Understanding what might motivate them to abuse prescription drugs can help parents, teachers, coaches and others ask the right questions and intervene early.

So why prescription drugs? Here are a few reasons.

- **To escape or self-medicate.** Many teens admit using prescription drugs to help ease stress, get an added boost of energy, lose weight or feel good. They turn to the medicine cabinet to help manage their lives or escape problems. They are especially vulnerable to this behavior if they see parents or other adults using drugs inappropriately or to cope with life problems.
- **Thrill seeking.** For some, “pharming” or “bowling” parties are the “cool thing to do” and the latest way to get high. Teens put different kinds of prescription drugs in a bowl or a bag (called making “trail mix”) and will take a handful of pills. They often don’t know what drugs they are taking or how they will affect their mind or body.
- **Lack of self-esteem.** Some teens may think that stealing and supplying medications to their peers will help them fit in; taking them may take the edge off, giving them the courage and confidence to be sociable.
- **It’s cool and there’s less of a stigma.** Experimenting with prescription drugs is seen as the “thing to do.” Teens may think there is less shame taking these medications versus street drugs. Teens are often exposed to media—like movies and TV shows—that help normalize or even glamorize prescription drug use, while downplaying the potential dangers. Direct-to-consumer television and magazine ads commonly tout promises of medications to fix problems or enhance quality of life without providing a complete picture of the risks of abuse/misuse.
- **It’s safe.** Most teens think prescription drugs are the safer way to get high; they also feel less shame and believe these drugs have fewer side effects than illicit drugs. After all, they’ve seen their mom, dad, grandparents and other family members taking these medications to treat various illnesses. Teen fail to understand that these drugs are only safe for the person they have been prescribed to treat. When these same drugs are used by the wrong person or mixed with other substances, there can be grave and possibly deadly results.

- **Prescription drugs are easy to find (and free).** Prescription drugs are readily available, and often free. All it may take is opening the medicine cabinet at home, at grandma and grandpa's or friends' houses. Some teens may not need to go in search of other peoples' medications. Instead, they misuse their own prescription medications in hopes of enhancing their pharmacological benefits.
- **It's easier to hide.** Some teens say they turn to prescription drugs because the effects of these drugs are harder to detect; there is typically no smell or lingering effects as there is with pot, for example. They see these medications as an easier choice for a quick, cheap high.
- **Parents are less likely to be angry.** One in five teens surveyed believe that parents wouldn't care as much if they got caught taking prescription medication compared to street drugs.