

A photograph of a desk with a calculator, glasses, books, and a spilled pill bottle. The pill bottle is blue and has white pills spilling out onto the desk. The text "Under the Influence" is overlaid on the image in large white letters.

Under the Influence

Drugs and alcohol are increasingly becoming incorporated into the high school experience.

By ROHINI KUMAR, *Staff Writer*

Disclaimer: Due to the sensitive nature of the story, the names of certain sources have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

Generations of high school students have dealt with the pressures of adolescence, shifting atmospheres and everything else the typical teenage experience entails. The transition from childhood to adulthood is by no means a simple process, as the teenage years are full of changes and experiences that shape people into who they will become. Most adolescents also find themselves entrusted with a greater level of freedom, more responsibilities and a newly developed sense of self. A common byproduct of this relatively rapid change is the pursuit of an accessible stress outlet. For a select few students, this outlet turns out to be substance use.

The ubiquity of drugs and alcohol among high school students is not a new phenomenon. The social environment of high school provides the circumstances and incentives necessary to become a marketplace for illicit substances. For tired and overworked students who seek a break from the stress, drugs and alcohol are an attainable distraction.

Additionally, the negative, taboo-like perception of drugs and alcohol which is forced upon students from a young age stigmatizes the already sensitive subject, potentially making it more appealing.

Substance use amongst Stanton College Preparatory School students seems to exist on a much smaller scale than in schools nationwide. An online survey conducted by the Devil's Advocate revealed that 50 percent of respondents had tried alcohol and 25 percent had used illegal drugs. Statistics from the National Institutes of Health, on the other hand, showed that by their senior year, 72 percent of American high school students have tried alcohol and 49 percent have used illegal drugs. There have also been few incidents specifically at Stanton—according to school administrators, in the past five years, only one student has been caught using drugs or alcohol on campus.

However, these low numbers do not apply to every school, and in an effort to explain higher rates, teenage substance use has been attributed to peer pressure, excess stress from school and mental illness. Honest



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curious and will do things we should not—it's human nature.” However, not everyone agrees with Steven's point of view. Many students reject this view of “human nature,” perhaps providing a look into the academically focused culture prevalent at Stanton. Junior Sydney Lewis' decision to abstain from substance use was related to her personal ambitions for adolescence.

My main motivation was curiosity, not to fit in or feel cool. We as teenagers are naturally curious and will do things we should not—it's human nature.

—Steven, 11

verification of these potential motives can only come from users themselves. Many times, drug and alcohol users are often criticized without any consideration for their circumstances or reasoning. Developing an understanding of individual users can facilitate the formation of a clearer perception of drug and alcohol traditions within the high school environment.

“WE ALL WANT TO KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE”

Although attempting to understand each student's reasons for drug and alcohol use can be a valuable undertaking, the inherent singularity of each person's circumstances results in an abundance of different motives. In rigorous and demanding educational programs, such as the ones at Stanton, student substance use may indicate the presence of escapist inclinations. Drugs and alcohol are

“I was in a really bad part of my life and I needed something that would let me leave the madness of my mind,” said John. “Marijuana helped me remove myself from places I didn't want to be.”

John's situation may resonate with other students, as stress and pressure are two omnipresent components of adolescence for many people throughout the United States. When the weight of such a crisis exceeds personal limits, substances may appear to be the easiest, most immediately effective path to relief. However, the need to escape was not the only factor pushing John to try substances—natural curiosity played a role as well.

“I have always been fascinated by drug culture and the world it encompasses. We all want to know what it feels like,” said John. “I wanted to try LSD because I read all of Timothy Leary's books on psychedelics and was fascinated by the experiences he wrote about.”

The desire to try what society has deemed off-limits introduces another source of motivation for students who take part in substance use. Despite the myriad of claims alleging peer pressure and mental discontent as reasons for drug and alcohol use, many people are more interested in trying something new. The yearning for novel and intriguing experiences may overcome any existing fears of potential risks, especially because of the societal emphasis placed on the cognitive distortions caused by drugs and alcohol.

“My main motivation was curiosity, not to fit in or feel cool,” said Steven, an anonymous junior. “I do agree substances will impair health with consistent use, as do my peers. But if you believe the teenage years are meant to be pure, I disagree. We, as teenagers, are naturally

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one way teens try to distract themselves from the throes of immediate reality—for anonymous Stanton senior John, this need for a diversion was what initially pushed him to try smoking marijuana.



The presence of teenage drug and alcohol use in popular culture (such as the above books and movies) has normalized illicit substances in the eyes of some teenagers.

of how the personal aims and values rooted in one's culture can impact one's choices regarding substance use. The role that the surrounding environment plays in adolescents' decision making processes has long been a subject of debate, especially when the decisions in question involve drugs and alcohol. Considering the role social relationships play in the use and circulation of illegal substances, it is important to understand the nature of these connections. For anonymous senior Matthew, his first time using drugs was prompted by the need to create a particular image for himself.

"In seventh grade, I smoked pot for the first time," said Matthew. "I didn't like it, but I tried it again in ninth grade, and still didn't like it. I wanted to try it just to say I did it."

Though Matthew's reasons for substance use later changed to involve cultural and medical factors, his initial motives demonstrate the potential impressionability of growing minds. While there are plenty of teenagers who use drugs and alcohol for their own personal reasons, some students' decisions are influenced by social interactions rather than intrinsic motivation. While this means one thing for students, the link between substance use and the social setting carries heavy significance for school administration.

"In order to make sure that one student's actions don't harm other students' well being, we have safety measures in place," said Stanton Assistant Principal Mr. David Hemphill. "We have security staff, random searches and sweeps. Every adult is vigilant about looking out for problems."

For years, peer pressure has received considerable



blame in the debate over which social circumstances result in substance use. Quite conflictingly, the results of the Devil's Advocate online survey revealed peer pressure only played a role in the decisions of four percent of students who drink and eight percent of students who use illegal drugs. While overt peer pressure may not be a huge factor in student substance use, drugs and alcohol still carry a distinct social weight among the teenage population.

"Drugs and alcohol play a huge role in high school tradition—it's almost as if they serve as validation," said Matthew. "Some people may use them for personal reasons, like me. But others use them for the public eye."

"I CAN LET LOOSE"

The effects of drugs and alcohol are difficult to categorize, as their implications vary from person to person. Many adolescents extol the immediate gratification of drug and alcohol use, whereas others concern themselves with the accompanying consequences. For instance, many teens remain cautious of substances' potential to detract from academic performance. Though Steven first tried substances his freshman year, he kept them separate from his work to ensure his educational progress would not be affected.

"Substances might be good for heavily social situations like parties, but for studying and everyday student life, being sober is best," said Steven. "It's the state of mind that is most suitable for success."

In seventh grade, I smoked pot for the first time. I wanted to try it just to say that I did.

—Matthew, 12

However, Steven later ended up facing punitive repercussions as a result of his usage. At high schools like Stanton which employ challenging and weighty curricula, students are perpetually working amidst high stakes. The ramifications of drug and alcohol use may be especially daunting to these students, as they have the capability to drastically alter the course of their futures. This possibility is not only concerning to students, but school administration as well.

"Most student substance use happens at home, where we don't have jurisdiction," said Stanton Assistant Principal Mr. Michael Kerr. "As administrators, we can't control what happens at home, but we still try to help. We don't want our students to have to deal with law enforcement or disciplinary records when it's time for college applications."

Substances' influence on educational performance is just one part of the many effects they can have on users' mental states. Depending on the type of drug or dosage consumed, the magnitude of these effects in the short-term

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL AT STANTON



From Dec. 13 to Dec. 19, the *Devil's Advocate* conducted an anonymous online survey of 318 Stanton students about their drug and alcohol habits



50% of respondents reported having ever consumed alcohol, compared to 72% of high school students nationwide



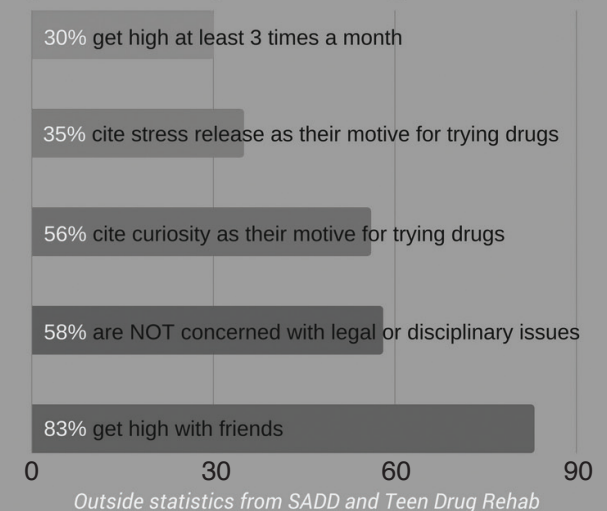
25% of respondents have tried illegal drugs at some point, compared to 49% of high school seniors nationwide



SPOTLIGHT: STANTON'S DRUG USERS



Of the students who reported using illegal drugs...



infographic by Walker Miller

may range from minimal to extreme. Kate, an anonymous junior, first tried drinking when she was 15, and experienced a response on a less intense scale than she expected.

"I didn't really have a reaction to alcohol—I just laughed at everything and became more bold than I already was," said Kate. "I can let loose, and it takes my mind off of things for the time being."

Kate's experience highlights the more subtle, socially prevalent effects of drugs and alcohol. But, it is also important to address the nature of drug-induced highs, which present the greatest potential to warp judgment and cognition. In a culture that emphasizes the correlation between self-control and success, the prospect of a temporarily compromised mental state is subject to heavy consideration and stigmatization.

Adolescent drug and alcohol use is often made out to be a typical characteristic of high school culture. In reality, it is not the ubiquitous phenomenon it is made out to be. Though some students choose to partake in substance use, many others do not, and the stereotyping of such a large group of students can result in deeper rifts between those who disapprove of drugs and alcohol and those who actually use them. Developing an understanding of every aspect of substance use can help one achieve a greater understanding of the teenage mind and population, for adolescents and adults alike.



photos by Mary Allison Kane