SUBSTANCE USE & ABUSE

A FOURFOLD PARTNERSHIP

Strong partnerships have strong impact. King Solomon taught, “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Kohelet 4:12). What he meant: what we struggle to achieve alone is less daunting and more achievable through strong collaboration - vertically, across generations, or horizontally, across institutions and communities. Our communal efforts have a much greater chance of success when we marshall our forces, when we come together to teach the values and commitments that we hold dear, and when we work together to shape - or reshape - our community.

When it comes to substance use and abuse, it has become increasingly important for us to leverage the collective strength of a fourfold partnership - school, shul, camp and community - collaborating across all of our ‘yeshiva league’ institutions to reshape culture regarding drugs and alcohol in our adolescent and young adult community.

There are a number of points of entry to the conversation and they are not mutually exclusive. Each is independently important. One side of the work must focus on the area of substance abuse and treatment strategies. We are making progress in openly acknowledging that substance abuse exists in our community, the need for proper treatment, and the importance of establishing support structures for families tackling this enormous challenge. We are already seeing the impact of the efforts to increase awareness, thanks to the leadership of a few courageous members of our community.

But we must also tackle this problem from a different angle. Substance use and its prevention is closely related to - but different from - substance abuse and its treatment. The former requires early intervention and its own set of strategies. The ‘fourfold partnership’ has a unique power and responsibility in this regard. Substance abuse and treatment requires the empathy and support of the community and its institutions. But tackling the growing culture of substance use - that gateway stage where alcohol and drugs shape the social environment of our children’s Saturday night parties and Friday night tisches, of Simchat Torah and Purim - that is not about being empathetic towards others; that is about each of us taking on the challenge of reshaping our community to be better and stronger than it is today. And there is a collective way forward.

Some might balk at the idea of such a partnership. Yeshivot, they say, should focus on curriculum and skills, on imparting a love of Torah and general wisdom - but what happens outside the school building is beyond the educators’ purview. Not so! And for two reasons: first, such boundaries are illusory. What happens outside of school becomes part of the school culture in a moment. It shapes our children’s shared experience and informs how they think about life. It quickly becomes the stuff of students’ discussions within and between schools. But it is not just that. As educators, we are both supremely responsible for and uniquely positioned to impact the whole child. Each student is a world, created in God’s image, with hopes and fears, strengths and limitations. Each must learn how to take risks
BINGE DRINKING:
WHAT YOU AND YOUR TEEN SHOULD KNOW AND TALK ABOUT

By: Dr. Michelle Humi,
School Psychologist

Every year we hear about teens who black out because they drank too much at a college weekend visit, Simchat Torah event, or weekend gathering. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 90% of underage drinking is consumed in the form of binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as drinking 4-5 drinks in one sitting, causing blood alcohol level to rise to dangerous levels in a short amount of time. During a binge, the liver does not have time to metabolize the alcohol fast enough, causing a “build up” of alcohol in the bloodstream. This can potentially cause alcohol poisoning, which occurs when the amount of alcohol in the blood is sufficient to threaten respiration.

Sometimes we hear that students called an adult or took their friend to the emergency room, but more often than not we hear that students took matters into their own hands. When we speak to our students in health class or advisory, they often express concern about what to do at parties when peers are highly intoxicated. In the same breath, while they express concern for their friends, they also express concern that if they call an adult for help they will get in trouble, or if they call 911 they will be arrested. Students also commonly express worry that their intoxicated friend will be mad at them the next day for “getting them in trouble.”

These fears are very real for teens and may make it difficult for them to reach out for help when they find themselves in a crisis situation. It is important that caring adults convey to teens a clear message: Alcohol poisoning is a serious medical emergency that requires immediate medical attention. While underage drinking is not condoned, if they or someone they are with is in need of medical attention, they should call 911 and involve adults without the fear of punishment. We tell our students that if they are with someone who is exhibiting any warning signs of alcohol poisoning (see page 4 for warning signs) they should call 911 and remain with the person until medics arrive. Furthermore, we encourage parents to review these warning signs with their teenagers.

Teens will often ask us what the legal ramifications are of calling 911. In our experience, and in doing some research, there has yet to be an arrest for underage drinking under these circumstances. We also remind them that saving someone’s life supersedes any legal action that may be taken. Another concern that students often have is getting in trouble with their parents. This is where PACT comes in to play. Parents are encouraged to communicate with their children about their expectations around alcohol and drug use, and also about their expectations regarding calling for help.

A SAMPLE DIALOGUE: (taken from an article published on the Freedom Institute website)

“I expect you not to drink. But, I always want you to call me if you are in a risky situation. If you are in circumstances involving alcohol and someone needs help, you should call 911, me or any other trusted adult. I would much rather you call for help than have you worry about being punished by me. There may indeed be a consequence if you personally have made such unhealthy choices, but my first concern is your safety. In the end, my response to the situation will be much tougher if you don’t call for help when it is needed.”
SUBSTANCE USE/ABUSE AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: MARIJUANA

By: Mr. Michael Courtney, Director of College Counseling

An astounding 38% of high school students have reported using marijuana in their lives, according to the 2017 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. That number is particularly alarming, considering that even in states that have legalized marijuana, it is still illegal to ingest the substance if under the age of 21. There are various ways for a teenager to get his/her hands on the mind-altering substance, with vaporizers (aka vapes or vape pens) becoming extremely prominent in recent years. A vape does not emit an odor and the apparatus is small and portable. Unfortunately, many high school students have adopted this method as an easier method to attain a high without considering the consequences.

The developing teen brain, quite simply, is not prepared for the negative outcomes associated with marijuana consumption. Permanent damage can be a result of regular or heavy use, with harm including difficulty thinking and problem solving; problems with memory and learning; altered coordination; and issues in maintaining attention. A teenager can experience a sharp decline in academic performance, anxiety or depression, an injury as a result of impaired judgment, and potential for addiction, with 1 in 6 teens becoming addicted to the mind-altering substance. Legal issues can also impact an adolescent’s life as a consequence of marijuana use.

While the media may present rampant recreational drug use through film, television, or music, teenagers should not feel alone if they abstain from marijuana consumption. The majority of high school students still refrain from drugs and find other outlets to experience a natural high—whether through exercise, listening to music, reading something stimulating, writing, painting, cooking/baking, playing an instrument, dancing, or various other opportunities—teens should be encouraged to take advantage of their hobbies that give them healthy ways to feel good and relieve stress.

VAPING: WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW

By: Dr. Russell Hoffman, School Psychologist

If you are the parent of a teenager, then you have probably already heard at least some information about vaping. Vaping is the latest trend in psychoactive substance delivery methods, which is a fancy way of saying “how you get a substance into your body so that it can have the desired effect on your brain.” Some substances are ingested and absorbed through the lining of the stomach, such as alcohol or a pill. Some substances are inhaled and absorbed in the lungs. When a substance such as tobacco (which contains the psychoactive substance nicotine) or marijuana (which contains the psychoactive substance tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC) is burned/smoked and inhaled, the lungs absorb the psychoactive substance along with other chemical compounds and byproducts of the combustion, some of which are detrimental to the healthy functioning of lung tissue. As our societal awareness of this health hazard has grown over the past few decades, we have seen a marked decrease in adolescents’ use of the most notoriously unhealthy and addictive nicotine delivery mechanism: cigarettes. Vaping, however, has put nicotine back on the map.

Vaping is a substance delivery method that involves inhaling the substance without burning or smoking it, and thus without the deleterious byproducts of combustion. Vaping involves heating a liquified form of the substance and inhaling the resultant vapor (hence the term “vaping”). Electronic cigarettes, or “e-cigarettes,” were originally conceived as a way for cigarette smokers to ease their nicotine cravings and to wean themselves off of cigarettes (similar in concept to a (continued on p. 6)
FROM THE SAR HANDBOOK...

By: Cari Cohen, Associate Director of College Counseling

WHAT IS PACT?

(Parents Ask Call Talk) SAR’s PACT program encourages parents and students to strengthen communication between parents and children, parents and parents, and parents and the school. One of the guiding principles of PACT is to present our adolescent students and parents with healthy, developmentally appropriate messages to combat the much louder and ubiquitous messages that they receive from the popular culture. Whether it be about alcohol and substance use, sexuality, or teenage life outside the walls of school, we seek to educate and open up the lines of communication and partnership.

The goals of PACT are expressed through parent meetings, PACT newsletters, school policies, Advisory, and school-wide programming. Along with Grade Level Coordinators and our PACT team, programs are created to further this mission, including:

- PACT staff-facilitated discussion using real life scenarios that open lines of communication between parents, their children and the school about parenting and decision making; and the balance between independence and supervision.
- Interactive evenings with parents sharing what students are learning about in their health and Beit Midrash classes regarding sexuality, wellness and good decision making.
- Evenings for students and parents hearing real life stories from community members about adolescent substance abuse experiences.

SAR’S SUBSTANCE POLICY IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

At SAR High School, our first concern is creating a safe school environment that fosters safe and smart decision-making by our students. A healthy and dynamic community of learners demands a commitment on the part of every person, both students and staff, to creating a safe and secure environment for all of its members. Drugs, tobacco, and alcohol have no place in our learning environment.

If we have reason to suspect that a student has possessed or used substances or provided them to others, whether inside or outside of school, we will call the student and his/her parents in to discuss our concerns and ensure shared commitment to maintaining a healthy and safe school environment. We may recommend treatment protocols, to which the student will be expected to adhere. A student may be asked to take a drug test at an accredited laboratory. SAR High School reserves the right to search student lockers if we have reason to suspect possession or use of substances or paraphernalia.

If we confirm to our satisfaction, that a student has possessed or used substances or provided them to others outside of school, we will meet with the student and his/her parents and require them to sign a contract specifying the conditions of their continued attendance at SAR High School. This contract will include clear delineations of unacceptable behavior, and may mandate drug testing at an accredited laboratory. If we confirm to our satisfaction that a student has possessed or used substances in school, or provided substances to other students in school, including in the vicinity of school during and after the school day, that will be grounds for the student’s being asked to leave SAR High School. Having vapor or other drug paraphernalia in school, including in the vicinity of school during and after the school day, will be considered evidence of substance use in school, and will be grounds for the student’s being asked to leave SAR High School.

Selling or dealing substances, whether inside or outside of school, during or after the school day, will result in the student’s being asked to leave SAR High School. Our expectations must balance respect for students’ privacy and self-determination with a responsibility to positively shape SAR High School culture and ensure students’ safety and welfare. SAR High School collaborates with parents to provide proper education, guidance and oversight to help adolescents make thoughtful, positive and healthy decisions around this issue. We expect parents to:

1. Talk with your child about the risks and potential consequences of substance use and abuse and encourage healthy, (continued on p. 6)
Warning Signs of Alcohol Poisoning:
The first sign of alcohol poisoning is usually vomiting, since the body is trying to protect itself by preventing any alcohol that remains in the stomach from being absorbed into the bloodstream. Other signs of alcohol poisoning include:

- Unable to stand or remain standing without assistance
- Skin can turn bluish purplish, can appear flushed, cold or clammy skin
- Person is not responsive to any physical contact (shaking, poking, pinching etc.,)
- Person is not responsive to talking or shouting
- Passed out and unresponsive to any attempt to wake up
- Vomiting while passed out
- Choking
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Slow irregular breathing, slow/irregular pulse rate slower than 40 beats per min
- Seizures

Prescription drug misuse has become a large public health problem. Prescription drugs are often strong medications, which is why they require a prescription in the first place. Every medication has some risk for harmful effects, sometimes serious ones. Doctors consider the potential benefits and risks to each patient before prescribing medications, and take into account a lot of different factors such as weight, other medical conditions, other medications one may be taking, and form and dose of the medication. When they are misused, they can be just as dangerous as drugs that are made illegally. This misuse can lead to addiction, and even overdose deaths.

For teens, it is especially a growing problem. After marijuana and alcohol, prescription drugs are the most commonly misused substances by Americans age 14 and older. Teens misuse prescription drugs for a number of reasons, such as to get high, to stop pain, or because they think it will help them with school work. Many teens get prescription drugs they misuse from friends and relatives, sometimes without the person knowing. Boys and girls tend to misuse some types of prescription drugs for different reasons. For example, boys are more likely to misuse prescription stimulants to get high, while girls tend to misuse them to stay alert or to lose weight.

In SAR HS we have set policies to ensure that prescription medications are administered to the right person at the right time with the right dose. According to the handbook, “Students at SAR High School are not permitted to carry any medications with them during the school day. Students must bring all medications, whether prescription or over-the-counter, to the nurse’s office. The only exceptions are self-administered medications such as inhalers and epi-pens. A copy of the prescription as well as signed parental consent are required for all students who receive prescription medication during school hours. This policy also applies to school trips and shabbatonim.” This policy ensures that the students get their medication at the proper time, that they are getting the right dose, and that students are not able to access someone else’s medication.
responsible choices. This should not be an isolated discussion - rather, it must be an ongoing conversation throughout your child's adolescence.

2. Ask your child about his/her social activities. This includes where they will be and with whom. This also includes communicating openly with other parents to verify plans, curfews, and travel arrangements, and to ensure that there will be adequate adult supervision.

3. Call host parents when appropriate to verify that there will be adequate adult supervision.

4. Provide vigilant and authoritative parental supervision when your child hosts a social gathering.

5. Ensure that your child is appropriately supervised on weekends, during vacations, and when you are away from home for extended periods of time.

6. Partner with SAR High School by sharing any questions, concerns and insights about substance use in the SAR community. Likewise, SAR High School will share with parents any concerns about students’ unsupervised, high-risk behavior and will actively collaborate with parents to implement and adhere to these guidelines.

If children host a party in their home, we expect them and their parents to abide by the law. It is illegal to provide alcoholic beverages to anyone under the age of 21. If children bring alcohol or drugs to a party, we expect parents to confiscate the substances. Non-compliance with this policy may lead to student and family expulsion.

Dr. Russell Hoffman, one of the SAR High School psychologists, is the point-person for questions and concerns about substance abuse and related issues. Parents, students and faculty should direct any such questions or concerns to Dr. Hoffman. If SAR High School has a reasonable concern about a student’s involvement in substance abuse, we will address this concern directly with the student and then share the concern with the student's parents. We will try to investigate and verify suspicions and concerns, and we will not act on those that seem unfounded. However, we will communicate with parents about concerns that seem potentially legitimate even if there is no definitive proof.

Lastly, respecting our community of learners in which all members of the school, students and faculty alike, interact in ways that reflect respect, collaboration, and a shared commitment to Torah and mitzvot. In the spirit of kol Yisrael areyvim ze la’ze, we commit ourselves to creating a safe and supportive environment for all members of our school community.

VAPING  nicotine patch or nicotine gum). Indeed, early e-cigarettes were designed to look like traditional tobacco products such as cigarettes and cigarillos. However, e-cigarettes have become increasingly popular with children and teenagers, and are now the primary mechanism by which kids and teens are first introduced to nicotine. And, alarmingly, kids who use e-cigarettes are 4-5 times more likely to also try tobacco products, namely traditional cigarettes.

While there are a variety of e-cigarette brands and models - you might have heard of the most popular and successful e-cigarette brand, Juul – they all follow the same functional model: an electric microprocessor heats a metal filament which is in contact with the liquid substance, and the resulting vapor is inhaled by the user. The liquid is typically contained in replaceable, disposable cartridges called pods. Teenagers often erroneously assume that the liquid is simply water infused with nicotine, but in reality the liquid in the pods is most often propylene glycol mixed with a number of other chemicals. Since e-cigarettes are not strictly regulated (at least, not yet), the exact chemical composition of the liquid is difficult to ascertain. E-liquid, or the liquid that is marketed for use in vaping devices, comes in flavored varieties, such as cotton candy or fruit flavors, that are popular with younger users. Some e-liquid is marketed as a flavor-only experience (i.e., without nicotine), but because of superficial regulation even these options can contain nicotine and other chemicals. Because of growing numbers of kids using e-cigarettes like Juuls, e-cigarettes were recently put on notice by the FDA to do more to ensure that their products are not consumed by minors.

While most adolescents who try vaping start out using it as a nicotine delivery mechanism, vaping can also be used to inhale THC (the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana). This involves using a vaping device to vaporize and inhale e-liquid infused with THC. These devices are often “vape pens,” so named because they are slender and cylindrical in shape, but vaping devices can come in different sizes and shapes.  (continued on p. 8)
A FOURFOLD PARTNERSHIP (continued from p. 1)

and cope with challenges. That is how one grows into oneself. Educators and parents must collaborate to ensure that the risks that our children take are the right ones and their coping strategies are healthy and balanced. The public conversation that began in our community earlier this year is about strengthening that partnership, establishing trust and investing our creative energies in tackling this challenge.

The middle schools in our community have been involved in cohesive and comprehensive discussions regarding ways to tackle this issue. I share one initiative we have begun on the high school front. Over the course of the past year, several Yeshiva high school administrators met together to discuss the issue of substance use in our “Yeshiva League” community and to explore possible approaches to the issue. We precisely focused on ‘use’, not ‘abuse’. Our anecdotal sense was that the use of marijuana and alcohol was on the rise in our teen community in a manner that has, in recent years, invaded the social fabric of the community even more intensely than in the past. Students who were not - and largely would not become - abusers, had nonetheless begun to socialize around these substances more than they previously had. The strategy of yeshivot to tackle this issue has largely focused on education programs and speakers, and developing health curricula. These are undoubtedly important and we must continue to strengthen the educational programming in our schools and community. We wondered if there was a way for our network of yeshivot to marshall our collective strength to more effectively shift the culture.

What we found: a ‘public health’ approach to the problem, one that does not rely on classroom education and deterrence strategies alone but, in addition, places significant energy into making cultural change. This approach does not only focus on providing information that would affect the conscious decision making of teens - although that, too, is important. Rather, it seeks to shift the routine behaviors of the teen community - how they socialize with each other and what they do with their free time.

In 1996 the city of Reykjavik, Iceland discovered that their teen community had a significant alcohol problem. A survey at the time showed that 42.5% of Reykjavik teens had gotten drunk in the recent past. Eighteen years later, in 2014, the number responding affirmatively to the same question was down to 5%. How did they achieve such substantial change? The Iceland model is a multi-pronged strategy: 1) surveys were scientifically designed and administered to gather meaningful data from teens; 2) the team developed pledges for parents to commit to increased quality time and shared curfews; and 3) the government invested in social programming so that teens had interesting things to do with their time. And the city was in it for the long haul. These types of steps resulted in real cultural change.

Such public health models require community organizing and they demand long term commitment. ‘Long term’ means thinking in terms of 5, 8, and 10 years of determined and consistent effort in order to make real cultural change. It requires a process that includes gathering student data via an extensive survey, developing a data-based community profile followed by a community action plan (that would allow us to partner with parents in this effort), and then implementing and evaluating the plan. It involves shifting the parent community toward increased and more open communication with each other about our children’s social lives. Data gathering, is the first step of the process. We have been very encouraged by the interest and support of yeshiva high school principals in this process and hope to collaborate with middle schools as well. We hope that continued support will allow us to begin a data gathering process across the Modern Orthodox high school community later this year.

I am proud that the Bergen County community has taken a leadership role in raising awareness about and directly confronting the challenges of substance use and abuse directly. Recent community events reflect that leadership, collaboration and communal concern as we begin to build this fourfold partnership together.

-Rabbi Tully Harcsztark, Principal
VAPING
(continued from p. 6)

Many teenagers who vape think that it is a safe, healthy way to use nicotine or THC recreationally. However, this is a false assumption. First, the vaping method is not without risk. While vaping does not involve inhaling combustion byproducts, it does involve inhaling a variety of chemicals. Some of these chemicals, especially the trace amounts of metals that can be found in many e-liquids, irritate the lungs and can cause inflammation, wheezing and coughing. Second, the psychoactive ingredients that vaping is meant to introduce into the body and brain are also problematic for adolescents. Nicotine affects the user's heart rate and blood pressure and is highly addictive. Adolescent brains are still maturing and developing neural networks. Introducing a psychoactive substance into the developing adolescent brain can negatively influence the brain's developmental trajectory, particularly in the reward centers and neural pathways. This is especially true for a strongly addictive substance such as nicotine, but it is a concern for any psychoactive substance (i.e., marijuana, alcohol, etc.). Namely, the developing adolescent brain is more vulnerable to establishing a dependence that will be very hard to break later in life.

For more information about what parents need to know about vaping, please feel free to reach out to us at SAR High School and/or consult a trusted online source such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) or the Child Mind Institute (https://childmind.org/article/teen-vaping-what-you-need-to-know/).

ADOLESCENT SUBSTANCE USE: WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T (YET) KNOW

By: Dr. Rivka Schwartz, Associate Principal

The federal government has for decades been collecting careful data about patterns of substance use among American adolescents. As a result, we are able to track shifting patterns of substance use among generations of adolescents.

The results are clear, and may be somewhat surprising. In contrast to what often seems like a hand wringing narrative about “kids these days”, use of both alcohol and street drugs is down among adolescents in the past thirty years. Both the percentage of high school seniors who have engaged in binge drinking in the past thirty days, and the percentage who have used marijuana, is down over that time span.

So is all sweetness and light? Not exactly. The advent of vaping, discussed in both Mr. Courtney’s and Dr. Hoffman’s articles in this issue, means that nicotine, after a decades-long decline, is making a comeback. And while it’s not yet reflected in the nationwide data, the growing movement towards decriminalizing marijuana in the states is likely to increase adolescent use, by increasing access and by decreasing the social stigma and perceived risk around marijuana use (even when decriminalization does not technically apply to those under 21.)

Here’s what we don’t know: does our Modern Orthodox community track with those broader national trends? Has substance use in our community, too, been going down? Or are we something of lagging indicator, years, or generations behind the national trends, in which case use in our community may have peaked more recently—or it may still be on the rise.

The very first step to effectively addressing substance use in our community, then, is to get an accurate read on the scope of the problem, and to garner an understanding of how we fit into, or stand apart from, the national trends. For this reason, the first step of the Yeshiva League Substance Use Initiative that Rabbi Harcsztark discussed in his article in this issue is to engage in community-wide data gathering. Working with a professional survey research firm, and employing a nationally-validated survey of adolescent behavior, we hope to administer this survey to twenty or more schools in February 2019, almost all of whom have already signed on to participate. Once we have this data, and a clear and accurate, rather than anecdotal and impressionistic, understanding of the scope of the issue in our community, we can employ a public health approach to design effective interventions that mobilize the whole community to help protect against a substance-use and party culture.

It’s not just what you learn. It’s who you become.

SAR High School 503 West 259 Street, Riverdale, NY 10471
718.548.2727 www.sarhighschool.org