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The issue of mental health has commonly found its way into my life around the time I entered my teenage years. My middle school teachers would often facilitate discussions to inform me about the topic. By the time I was thirteen, I was aware of the increasing rates of anxiety and depression among the people within my community and across the nation. By the time I was a highschool upperclassman, my concern over mental health among teenagers grew dramatically after noticing that my peers struggled with theirs. Two of my closest friends were struggling with anxiety and depression by the time we were all fifteen. I had one friend coming out of an eating disorder and another just entering one. When the time came to address my own issues, I didn't even hesitate to believe that I, too, struggled with my own mental health.

In my opinion, a subject that never fails to trail behind the growing rates of mental health disorders among teenagers is its connection to substance abuse. There is an obvious cultural stigma that is surrounded by drugs and alcohol use among adolescent life. With the introduction of "party culture," which tends to reach its height every weekend, those substances are not easily avoidable. This exposure to addictive substances such as drugs and alcohol are especially harmful to those with mental health disorders. They often become a symptom and can lead to dependencies.<sup>1</sup> There is a common misconception about the consumption of drugs and alcohol among adolescents being strictly alluded to misbehavior or rebellion. This culture steers us far from the harsh reality that for the many teenagers that struggle with mental health, drugs or alcohol can become an antidote.

The culture around alcohol and drug use, from my experience, tends to escalate towards the end of one's highschool career. This makes sense considering the increase in work loads and stress a student may be experiencing. As a result, people will probably "go harder" with their substances when given the opportunity during the weekends. I noticed a linkage between this kind of behavior and mental health at my own highschool. Those who struggled with mental health were drinking more and experimenting with different drugs. I've noticed that the relationship between mental health and substance use doesn't directly correlate with the severity of one's mental health issue. Sometimes, I believe, it's those who have subtle outbreaks of symptoms linked to a mental health disorder that resort to drugs or alcohol the most.

When teenagers jump between "feeling fine" and feeling mentally drained, it's difficult to just assume that they may be dealing with something like depression or anxiety. Most people I know who go through waves of feeling drained are undiagnosed with a mental health disorder, but use alternate methods to calm their symptoms rather than prescribed medication. This is how people can fall prey to alcohol or drug

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Miller, "Mental Health Disorders and Teen Substance Use," Child Mind, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://childmind.org/article/mental-health-disorders-and-substance-use/>.

dependencies. Given the high frequency of alcohol and drug use among teens, it's reasonable for dependencies to grow as their consumption cycles continue.

The connection between substance abuse and mental health disorders in teens can be found in many forms. Someone who's depressed may use marijuana to numb the pain, or someone suffering from social anxiety may drink themselves out of social discomfort. Someone struggling from panic attacks may take benzos or pop xanax to calm their symptoms or prevent their attacks. There are also people who abuse adderall or cocaine to increase their drive to get things done when they lack the motivation to do anything.<sup>2</sup>

To further examine the connection between mental health and substance abuse among adolescent life, I ran a poll on Instagram asking people to answer questions surrounding mental health and substance consumption. Those who participated in the poll were mostly within the New York City community and around my age. Out of around 40 people, 57% would consume alcohol on all or most weekends. 43% have a nicotine addiction. 44% have smoked weed more than 5 times in the last month. 37% have tried other drugs. 73% have either used drugs or drank alcohol to ease some kind of mental issue whether that be depression, social anxiety or just feeling mentally drained. Lastly, 97% of those people either struggle with a mental health issue or know at least one other person who does. I drew the conclusion that there are a large number of people within my peer group who consume substances as a symptom of mental health issues or know someone that does.

On a wider range, about two thirds of twelfth grade students in the U.S. have tried alcohol. About half of highschool students were reported ever having used marijuana. 20% of twelfth grade students were reported using pills without a prescription.<sup>3</sup> 86% of teenagers know someone who smokes, drinks or uses drugs during the school day.<sup>4</sup> 90% of those who abuse nicotine, alcohol or other drugs began using them before the age of 18.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 22% of teenagers in the U.S. are estimated to have a mental health disorder and 4.6% of those have substance abuse disorders.<sup>6</sup> Today, there are 42 million adolescents in the United States. This means

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<sup>2</sup> The Connection Between Mental Illness and Substance Abuse," Foundations Recovery Network, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://dualdiagnosis.org/mental-health-and-addiction/the-connection/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Teenage Drug Abuse and Addiction," Addiction Center, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.addictioncenter.com/teenage-drug-abuse/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Drug Use among Youth: Facts and Statistics," National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics Search, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://drugabusestatistics.org/teen-drug-use/>.

<sup>5</sup> "The Changing Face of America's Adolescents," HHS, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/facts-and-stats/changing-face-of-americas-adolescents/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Erin L. Winstanely et al., "Adolescent Substance Abuse and Mental Health: Problem Co-Occurrence and Access to Services," *Child Adolescent Substance Abuse* 4 (July 1, 2012): Accessed May 3, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1067828X.2012.709453>.

that around 9 million of those adolescents struggle with mental health and around 2 million of them have substance abuse disorders. Since these statistics don't account for those who are undiagnosed, it's likely that there are many more people who struggle with mental health and substance abuse than these numbers have indicated.

This information, accompanied by my personally derived information, proves that there is a definite correlation between teenage mental health and substance abuse. I'd assume that the results of my Instagram poll drove a higher correlation because of New York City's "fast living" culture. It's common for young New Yorkers to become independent at an early age. As a result of this, people are eager to grow up and happen to do so mentally rather quickly. This perpetuated lifestyle among New York City's youth can be very tiring and take a toll on mental health. Thus, issues around substance use are likely to follow. Nevertheless, the 2 million adolescents that may struggle with mental health substance abuse disorders should not go unnoticed. Perhaps, substance use and mental health among teens shouldn't be viewed as two separate issues.

When assessing mental health, teenagers are commonly advised to speak to someone and eventually get help by a professional. However, many of those who are unsure of their mental issues are probably reluctant to get help. Those who struggle with substance abuse especially avoid speaking to someone or speaking about that area of their struggle. Substance abuse can also be tricky because it is a common source for temporary relief-- a painkiller if you will.<sup>7</sup> Although it can lead to dependency, at desperate times, its long term effects are easily forgotten when it comes to easing anxiety or depressive moods.

I've noticed that adults, at times, have trouble recognizing the severity of the mental health or substance issue among the youth. When parents catch their children drinking or using drugs, they are quick to assume this behavior was solely driven out of rebellion. They attempt to force their children out of using substances by punishing them and pay little attention to the fact that their child may be experiencing issues with mental health. Similarly, when the topic of mental health is introduced at school, its relationship with substance abuse goes unspoken. Students learn about drug and alcohol use separately and are taught to avoid dependency. However, it is rarely mentioned that addiction has a close correlation to mental health issues.

It's also hard to force someone to avoid substance consumption when they don't want to. After punishing someone from vaping, drinking, or smoking weed, it's likely that they won't stop consuming those substances. If they have an actual problem or

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<sup>7</sup> "The Connection between Substance Use Disorders and Mental Illness," National Institute on Drug Abuse, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/common-comorbidities-substance-use-disorder/part-1-connection-between-substance-use-disorders-mental-illness>.

simply find pleasure in consuming those substances, they'll focus on avoiding getting caught again. For people who are also dealing with their mental health, the issue becomes even more complicated. Some people only feel happy when they are high or drunk, and they get trapped into the cycle of consuming substances to deal with their issues.

There is a culture around substance abuse in adolescent life that must change. While substance consumption at a young age should not necessarily be praised, people should not be too quick to shame someone for engaging in the act. Without considering the other possible factors that may lead someone to drink or use drugs, one shouldn't assume that someone would engage in those activities out of complete malintent. Since it has been proven that mental health and substance abuse issues are related, the issues should not be separated when assessing one's engagement in substance use. If a teenager cannot be open with their issue of substance abuse, they may be hesitant to share their struggle with mental health or vice versa.

While this culture is dangerous for teenage mental health, it's understandable as to why it exists. The American Psychological Association states that, "This generation is significantly more likely (27 percent) than other generations, including millennials (15 percent) and Gen Xers (13 percent), to report their mental health as fair or poor, the survey found."<sup>8</sup> A possible reasoning for this is our mass exposure to the internet. Our current youth's obsession with online social networking may play into the increasing amounts of mental health issues.

Social media perpetuates specific standards of how one should live their life or look. It's a kind of manipulation that people may unintentionally use to make you feel insecure about how you look or what's going on in your own life.<sup>9</sup> We can easily become obsessed with the idea of the perfect way of living or looking. These social standards eventually work against us by affecting our mental health. Constant social media usage also doubles as a kind of isolation. As one angles their preference of social interaction towards an online alternative rather than in person, they increase their dependency to social media as well as the feeling of loneliness. Lessened face to face contact with others can also contribute to increased stress and lower moods.<sup>10</sup> The more social media interactions are prioritized against face to face interactions, the risks of developing depression or anxiety disorders are increased.

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<sup>8</sup>Sophie Bethune, "Gen Z More Likely to Report Mental Health Concerns," American Psychological Association, last modified January 2019, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/gen-z>.

<sup>9</sup> "Social Media and Mental Health," Help Guide, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> "Social Media," Help Guide.

The linkage between social media and mental health can be supported by the fact that severe depression among America's youth has increased by 52% from 2005 to 2017.<sup>11</sup> Social media was brought to light around 2004, which gave only one year for rates of mental issues to possibly increase outside of the study's findings.<sup>12</sup> Studies indicate that, "the proportion of high school students reporting to frequently feel anxious or depressed has doubled in the last thirty years from 1 in 30 to 2 in 30 for boys and 1 in 10 to 2 in ten for girls."<sup>13</sup>

Since the struggle of mental health among teenagers went on the rise only recently, America hasn't completely adapted to the issue. If mental health among teens wasn't commonly spoken about among older generations, it's likely that its relationship with substance abuse also went unspoken. It was easy to separate teenage substance consumption from mental health when teenage mental health wasn't a common topic of conversation. However, this generation is moving, and will continue to move, in a different direction than previous ones. For this to go smoothly, there must be some cultural shifts in the way we view these issues. This starts with viewing teenage substance abuse as a symptom or form of mental health.

The culture around mental health should acknowledge the increasing rates of mental health issues among adolescents. Teenagers should feel open about addressing their concerns over their mental health issues as well as their issues with substance consumption. Parents shouldn't be so quick to shame their children for drinking or using drugs without considering its relation to mental health. Schools should include substance consumption and abuse in their sessions about mental health. They should facilitate conversations about both topics together and create an environment where students feel safe sharing their issues and getting help.

When teenage mental health or substance abuse becomes a social issue or over generalized, it can make people struggling with their individual issues feel even more isolated. I think my focus on attempting to assess these kinds of issues is first not to criticize someone for struggling with mental health or substance consumption. They are related, yet are culturally treated as separate issues. If mental health is an increasing issue for adolescents, substance abuse will be as well. With the possible effects of social media, this generation is the first to see a noticeable rise in both issues. It may take time to culturally adjust and accept these issues, but implications

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<sup>11</sup> Raychelle Cassada Lohmann, "What's Driving the Rise in Teen Depression?," U.S. News, last modified April 22, 2019, accessed May 3, 2020,

<https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2019-04-22/teen-depression-is-on-the-rise>.

<sup>12</sup> "The Changing Face of America's Adolescents," HHS, accessed May 3, 2020,

<https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/facts-and-stats/changing-face-of-americas-adolescents/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Nuffield Foundation, "Increased Level of Teenage Anxiety and Depression as Teenage Experience Changes over Time," Nuffield Foundation, last modified December 3, 2012, accessed May 3, 2020,

<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/increased-levels-of-anxiety-and-depression-as-teenage-experience-changes-over-time>.

must be made to start. During this stage in American society, teenage mental health issues, including substance abuse, have reached a new normal and it would be a shame if they weren't treated as such.

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<sup>10,11</sup> "Social Media and Mental Health." Help Guide. Accessed May 3, 2020.  
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<sup>13</sup> "Winstanely, Erin L., Donald M. Steinwachs, Maxine L. Stitzer, and Marc J. Fishman. "Adolescent Substance Abuse and Mental Health: Problem Co-Occurrence and Access to Services." *Child Adolescent Substance Abuse* 4 (July 1, 2012): 310-22. Accessed May 3, 2020. [https://doi.org/10.1080/  
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