

TEACHER DISCUSSION GUIDE

LIVED EXPERIENCES SPOTLIGHTS

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Throughout the lessons, students will engage with authentic stories shared by individuals with lived and living experiences. These spotlights present real perspectives, told in the individual’s own words and language, offering students meaningful insight into the realities of substance use.

LEARNING ACTIVITY 2

Part 1- Darcy’s Story: A Parent’s Perspective on Raine’s Substance Use Journey

I had hoped Raine wouldn’t and I took every opportunity to talk to them about drugs and the devastating effects on their lives if they did it. Their father has Substance Use Disorder and seeing what we were going through with him, I prayed it would deter them. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case.

I don’t remember when it started but I know they were around 17 years old, and I

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believe their peers may have given Raine alcohol and drugs. I didn't see any signs until much later.

I thought it was just marijuana and alcohol but I learned later on that it was cocaine and alcohol, and later in their addiction it was pretty much anything they could get their hands on to give them that high.

I love my kids more than life and always wanted to make them happy, but my life was spiraling out of control and my child's addiction took over my every thought. I couldn't concentrate on work, lost my relationship with my husband, my daughter, and pretty much anyone who would try to talk to me about what I needed to do. I wouldn't listen and didn't realize how much I was enabling Raine by giving them money, my truck, my home, washing their clothes, feeding them, and basically anything else they wanted. My husband and I were at odds. It was a horrible time in my life. I wouldn't wish this on anyone. I was loving my child to death and killing myself in the process.

Raine is now twenty-five and is three plus years sober and doing great. They have worked very hard to get where they are and are making a great life for themselves. My life has changed dramatically. I no longer worry (well, maybe a little) about where Raine is or what they are doing. Life is getting better.

Discussion Questions:

Why do you think cocaine can be dangerous?

- Speeds up the body and brain, causing rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, and anxiety
- Very addictive, making people want to keep using it even when it harms them
- Long-term use damages the heart, lungs, and brain, and causes sleep and mood problems
- Overdose can cause seizures, stroke, heart attack, or sudden death
- Mixing with alcohol creates *cocaethylene*, a toxic substance that increases the risk of sudden death, liver damage, and heart problems.

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Which protective factors might have helped Raine avoid or reduce substance use?

- **Family:**
 - Stronger boundaries at home and avoiding enabling behaviours.
 - Supportive family environment without substance use.

- **Community:**
 - Early access to counselling or mental health support.
 - Positive peer influences who did not use substances.
 - Involvement in safe community activities or programs.

Which risk factors seemed influential in Raine's decisions about substance use?

- **Individual:**
 - Family history of Substance Use Disorder (their father's addiction).
 - Exposure to marijuana and alcohol in late adolescence (ages 17-18).

- **Family:**
 - Family stress and conflict, including strained relationships.
 - Lack of early recognition of warning signs.

- **Community:**
 - Easy access to other substances, including cocaine and alcohol.

In what ways did Raine's substance use impact their mom, Darcy?

- Darcy's life spiraled out of control, and she could not focus on work.
- Her relationships with her husband and daughter broke down.
- She became isolated and cried often, straining family connections.
- She enabled Raine by providing money, housing, food, and her truck.
- Her mental health suffered, requiring high doses of antidepressants.
- Over time, when Raine entered recovery, Darcy's health and life improved.

TEACHER DISCUSSION GUIDE**Part 2- Lowen's Journey: Understanding the Realities of Substance Use**

My first experience with substances was when I was in 8th grade. My friend, who was on substances at the time, brought a vape into school. They asked me if I wanted to try, I declined, but they kept asking, and eventually I gave in. I tried it and I didn't like it.

After school, this friend came home with me to hang out and brought their vape. I tried it again and again until I started having fun with it. This was not the end of my substance use. From then on, I started experimenting with alcohol and weed and eventually couldn't stop.

When I think about what may have influenced my use, it was in part because I was frustrated with my family life. At the time, my family was always arguing and my brother was already smoking weed, so I thought it couldn't be that bad, as he seemed to be doing well for himself. Later, I found out he was not.

When I first started to use everything seemed fine, but then I started to use more. After a while, I didn't want to do anything. Nothing I did before was interesting anymore. All I did was stay in my room, sleep, and play games, isolating myself from friends and family.

When my mom found out about my drinking and substance use, she reached out to the mental health center where my brother was staying for help. They told my mom they had a sister location, 4 hours away, for substance use rehabilitation. I stayed there for 2 weeks in their withdrawal management program, which helped me stop using.

The person I feel the most comfortable asking questions or concerns to is my addiction counsellor. I was assigned to her after my stay in rehabilitation. If you don't have a counsellor, the next best place is to call 811. They always helped me when I needed it.

What I wish adults, or just people in general, would understand about substance use is that making someone feel ashamed about substance use doesn't help. It only

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makes things worse and makes it harder to reach out for help. A lot of people, like me, turned to substances because of other problems in their lives. Some people are looking for an escape.

Substance use fit into my life weirdly. It's different for everyone, I used it as an escape from reality. I wanted not to feel anything bad, but when I am sober, it feels like all the negative emotions I would have felt when I was under the influence are stacked on top of how I already feel. In the end, it only makes me feel way worse than I did before I used it. It's like having a friend who is fun to hang out with but is leading you down the wrong path to unhappiness.

Discussion Questions:

At what age did they start using? How do you think starting this impacted their trajectory around substance use?

- Started in 8th grade (around 13–14 years old).
- Early use increases the risk of developing a substance use disorder because the brain is still developing.
- May normalize substance use as a coping strategy for stress or family problems.
- Earlier exposure can lead to faster escalation into more frequent use and experimenting with other substances.

Which factors might have put Lowen at greater risk of developing a substance use disorder?

- **Individual:**
 - Early experimentation with substances.
 - Using substances to cope with negative emotions or stress.
 - Exposure to peers who use substances.
- **Family:**
 - Family conflict and frequent arguments at home.
 - Older sibling who uses substances (normalizing the behavior).

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- Possible lack of open, supportive communication about substance use.
- **Community:**
 - Easy access to substances through peers.
 - Limited immediate access to local youth addiction support services (needed to go 4 hours away).

Which protective factors might have helped support Lowen?

- **Individual:**
 - Willingness to seek and accept help.
 - Openness to working with an addiction counselor.
 - Understanding harm reduction tools like naloxone.
- **Family:**
 - Mother actively sought professional help.
 - Family connected the youth with withdrawal management services.
- **Community:**
 - Access to withdrawal management programs and trained professionals.
 - Support from addiction counsellors after treatment.
 - Availability of 811 as a free, confidential support resource.

How did developing a substance use disorder affect Lowen?

- Lost interest in previous hobbies and activities.
- Isolated from friends and family, spending most time alone in their room.
- Shifted priorities to substance use over school, social connections, or personal growth.
- Emotional withdrawal and reduced engagement in daily responsibilities.
- Became isolated from friends and family.
- Needed substances just to cope, which led to addiction.
- Felt worse when sober, with negative emotions piling up.

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What are some potential long-term impacts of alcohol use disorder?

- Long-term brain changes affecting memory, learning, and decision-making.
- Increased risk of chronic health conditions (liver disease, heart disease, digestive problems).
- Greater likelihood of developing mental health disorders like depression or anxiety.
- Social and legal consequences from risky behavior while impaired.

TEACHER DISCUSSION GUIDE**LEARNING ACTIVITY 3****Katie's Experience with Substance Use**

I did not become addicted. For me, I always had a curious nature for as far back as I can recall. During my teens some of my peers began to experiment with various substances. I suppose I looked at it as if I didn't want to go through life thinking I was missing out on something.

I initially tried weed and felt like it just wasn't for me. This largely remained the same heading into my early 20s, at which point I found myself experiencing a lot of stress and anxiety as a result of various work and relationship struggles. Slowly, I began experimenting with weed use more regularly, finding that it could help quiet the ongoing noise inside my head. Eventually, this developed into smoking regularly aside from my working hours. This pattern then persisted for well over a year before I began to recognize that it was impacting other aspects of my life.

Initially, I felt as though it was a net positive for me, particularly mentally. I generally felt happier and less stressed. The issue became when I began looking at smoking as a bonus to any activity/event. Simple things I previously enjoyed while sober, like getting out for a walk with the dog, taking part in hobbies like performing music or playing sports, or socializing with friends, slowly started to seem 'boring' without me being high. Eventually, it began to feel as though I couldn't enjoy any experiences without being stoned. I began to slip into a pretty sedentary lifestyle as well, often resorting to lazing around for the evenings outside of my daily work duties. Because my work was not directly impacted, I failed to see how it could have been an issue. Eventually, I noticed some of my relationships began to deteriorate. My girlfriend at the time felt as though we were no longer communicating effectively, peers reported me being 'distant' and my parents informed me that they felt like I was drifting out of their life.

Ultimately, I did not aim to completely remove cannabis use from my life, but rather significantly reduce my dependency on it. First and foremost, I had to want that for myself. There were some attempts early on where I didn't take it seriously, only to slip back into the same lifestyle a few days later. In time, I was willing to open up to my inner circle, consisting of my partner, friends, and family, about the severity of my use and my worries around its impacts on my life. While initially it was a very difficult conversation to have, it was also as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders in some ways. My girlfriend opened my mind to the thought of exploring counselling, and from there I also availed of some substance use-centred counselling. It was definitely

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a team effort, with a lot of folks involved to work toward a common goal.

In the end, I was able to get to a place with cannabis use where I no longer feel a dependency on it. I have learned that I was more or less numbing a lot of experiences, rather than ‘enhancing’ them as I once thought. It was a very rewarding (albeit at times, heavy) experience to truly feel my emotions once again.

Discussion Questions:

What reasons did Katie give for starting to use substances?

- Curiosity in her early 20s, wanting to try what peers were experimenting with.
- Stress and anxiety from work and relationship struggles.
- Saw cannabis as a way to quiet the “noise” in her head.

What would you currently place Katie’s cannabis use on the Substance Use Spectrum, and how did it change over time?

- Began at low risk (occasional experimentation).
- Shifted to high risk (regular use, dependency, negative impacts on activities and relationships).
- Returned to low risk after seeking help and reducing dependency.

What perceived positive effects did Katie notice when she first started using cannabis?

- Helped quiet her mind and reduce stress and anxiety.
- Felt happier and less stressed overall.
- Used cannabis as a way to self-medicate her stress and mental health challenges.

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What negative effects did cannabis have on Katie's health, activities, and relationships?

- Lost interest in activities she once enjoyed (walking her dog, music, sports, socializing).
- Became more sedentary, often staying in instead of going out.
- Relationships suffered: poor communication with her girlfriend, distance from peers, and her parents felt she was drifting away.

What protective factors and supports helped Katie reduce her use of cannabis?

- Supportive girlfriend, family, and close friends.
- Willingness to open up and seek help (help-seeking behaviour).
- Access to substance-use focused counselling.

What do you think some people develop a Substance Use Disorder while others do not?

- People have different levels of risk factors (e.g., mental health challenges, family history, trauma, peer influence, access).
- People also have different protective factors (e.g., supportive relationships, coping skills, community resources, early help-seeking).
- For Katie, strong support and her decision to seek help reduced the likelihood of developing a Substance Use Disorder.
- The developing brain (up to about age 25) is more vulnerable to the effects of substances, which can increase the risk of dependency and long-term impacts.

TEACHER DISCUSSION GUIDE**LEARNING ACTIVITY 4****Adair's Story: Understanding the Impact of Stigma**

I grew up in a home with two parents who had alcohol use disorder. I swore to myself that I would never live the way they lived, and I would never do to my future children what was done to me mentally and emotionally.

I hung around with an older group of people than myself. We played a lot of sports, and drinking was a big part of that. I remember how much I loved the way alcohol made me feel, and I knew from the first drink that I was dependent. The drug use didn't come along for many years later. I knew I couldn't hide alcohol use, but I thought if I was using pills, I would be able to hide it. For the first little while, I was able to use only pills, but shortly after, my alcohol use disorder came back with a vengeance.

I started out with alcohol in my late teens. When I was 17, I was prescribed a benzodiazepine for severe anxiety and became dependent on it pretty quickly. As an adult, I started using Percocet, Ritalin and Cocaine along with my benzos and alcohol. I also used Tylenol 3's, Tylenol 8's and pretty much anything with codeine in it.

When I was using it, my life was in complete chaos. I worked to pay for my habits until my substance use had complete control over my life, and I was unable to work anymore. I lost my children, my family, my business and any friend I had at the time. I lost my home and ended up walking the streets until I found somewhere to live. I had zero self-respect, I lost the ability to make any rational decisions for myself, and I almost lost the will to live.

After months of being on my own and feeling completely defeated, I went to see my family doctor and asked for a referral to go to a treatment center. I ended up going to an inpatient treatment facility for a 28-week treatment program and a community addiction centre for a 12-step program. I continue to attend my Narcotics Anonymous program and enjoy doing service work to help others with addiction. This also helps me in my recovery. I now know that I should have reached out to get help earlier. I've reconnected with my family and friends, and they are a good support for me. I have a job and an apartment, and I am now happy with my life. I know I'll always struggle with addiction, but I feel like I'm in a much better place now, and I know who to reach out to for help.

TEACHER DISCUSSION GUIDE**Discussion Question:**

How do you think growing up with parents who had alcohol use disorder influenced Adair's risk for substance use? How might stigma around their parent's substance use impact Adair?

Parents AUD likely increased Adair's risk due to:

- Early exposure to substance use as a coping mechanism.
- Family instability and emotional stress.
- Possible genetic or psychological vulnerability to addiction.

Stigma may have:

- Created shame or secrecy about family life.
- Led to isolation or reluctance to seek help.
- Lowered self-esteem and increased emotional distress.

What types of stigma do you think Adair experienced during their teen years? Given an example of structural stigma, social stigma, and self-stigma.

- **Structural stigma:**
 - Lack of youth-friendly substance treatment programs or limited access to care for teens using substances.
 - School, legal, or health systems not equipped or willing to support someone with early substance use.
- **Social stigma:**
 - Judgement from peers: being excluded, labelled "troublemaker" or "addict in the making".
 - Negative attitudes from adults (coaches, teachers) seeing Adair's drinking as moral failure.
- **Self-stigma:**
 - Adair believing that drinking meant they had a flaw or character problem
 - Internal shame or guilt for liking how alcohol felt, seeing themselves as "weak".

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What types of stigma do you think Adair experienced when they were an adult? Given an example of structural stigma, social stigma, and self-stigma.

- **Structural stigma:**
 - Difficulty getting treatment or being taken seriously by medical or mental health systems.
 - Policies that stigmatize people in recovery (e.g. barriers to employment, housing for former substance users).
- **Social stigma:**
 - Judgement or rejection by family, friends, community after they lost children, home, business.
 - Others assuming they were unreliable, dangerous, untrustworthy because of their history.
- **Self-stigma:**
 - Feeling unworthy of recovery, believing “I don’t deserve help”.
 - Internalized negative labels about addiction, thinking they were a failure.

How might experiences with stigma have affected Adair’s choices, relationships, or ability to get help?

- Adair may have delayed seeking help because of shame or fear of being judged.
- Isolation from support systems (friends, family) due to social stigma.
- Loss of trust in professionals, hesitation to disclose substance use.
- Relationships strained or broken (family, children, friends) because of how others viewed them.
- Lower self-esteem, self-worth, leading to more risky or harmful behaviours.

How might growing up with parents who had alcohol use disorder have influenced Adair’s own risk for substance use? In what ways could stigma toward their parents’ substance use have affected Adair’s experiences or choices?

Growing up around substance use can make it seem normal or acceptable.

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- Biological factors (like genetics or family history) can increase risk for addiction.
- Adair may have lacked emotional support or positive coping examples.
- Family stress or conflict can raise the risk of later substance use.
- Adair might have felt conflicted. They may have wanted to avoid substances but were still drawn to use.
- Stigma toward parents may have caused shame or isolation.
- Stigma could make it harder to ask for help or talk openly.

How might Adair's opportunities or choices look different if they didn't experience stigma?

- Adair may have reached out for help earlier instead of hiding their substance use.
- They might have had better access to youth support and treatment.
- Without stigma, they could have maintained stronger relationships and community connections.
- Compassionate, nonjudgmental support may have helped them keep their job, home, and family.
- They could have developed healthier coping skills for stress and anxiety.
- Their confidence and self-worth might have been protected, leading to earlier recovery and less harm.