For youth leaders, this is a study of a teenager who has a substance abuse problem and was released from a detention center. It involves a seventeen old male who abuses marijuana, alcohol, and ecstasy; and is also the son of two ministers.

OVERVIEW

This story should help readers understand the dynamics involved with a teenage drug user and will also help youth leaders develop effective skills for reaching out to a troubled teen in need of support, especially after incarceration.

NARRATIVE

A seventeen-year-old male, "Jimmy," lived in a middle-class suburb. Jimmy was referred to me by a pastor, because he felt my training in prison ministry might be helpful in reaching this kid, and because Jimmy’s mother requested help. An appointment was set to meet the teen at his house, with his mother present in an adjacent room.

During the conversation, several facts emerged. Jimmy had been in trouble with the legal system, mostly for drug possession and motor vehicle infractions. He said he had been kicked out of high school because of his drug use. He had been using alcohol and marijuana since he was about 13. He had more recently been taking ecstasy.

When asked why he used drugs, he claimed it reduced his boredom and provided a way to escape and have fun. Additionally, it was discerned that his father worked long hours (in the mental health field), and was basically absent from the family. Later, I learned that his father denied his son’s habits. The family, which includes a younger 16-year-old brother, had gone to see a therapist but Jimmy was an unwilling participant.

Jimmy noted that he does have a problem with authority figures—like the police—because he believes they are "corrupt." Jimmy did admit that police have a job to do, in terms of protecting people from harmful practices. Jimmy also realized that there are consequences of drug use and that he was headed for a state prison sentence if he did not improve his actions. He learned that his mother could be arrested under law if he had drugs in her house; this bothered Jimmy. I was direct about what state prison was like. Throughout the intervention, the I listened and affirmed the young man without condoning his bad behavior. In the end, I gained his trust and told him that his personal feelings would be kept confidential. I recommended that Jimmy be careful when he with his peers, and I encouraged him to select a friend who would help hold
him accountable. I shared my phone number with him. Jimmy’s behavior improved.

LESSONS AND PRINCIPLES

The number of young people using drugs is high, and it crosses all socioeconomic classes. The Department of Justice is a good resource to locate the most current statistics.

- Most high school students have used alcohol and many others have used cocaine or heroin.
- The reasons why drug abuse occurs include:
  - Media influence. TV is full of episodes depicting/encouraging drug use.
  - Peer pressure.
  - Family factors, such as history of alcohol use/abuse.
  - Genetic predisposition or chemical imbalances.
  - Personality and developmental issues; a need to hide from pain/struggles.
- You can help young people struggling with substance abuse by:
  - Understanding the types of drugs and language used by abusers. Read the literature on addictions and related factors.
  - Listen to and affirm the youth; try to understand the family and social issues which have contributed to abuse.
  - Be mindful that abusers may want to make sure you are not a "narc," so be trustworthy and develop a rapport with the goal of helping find solutions.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your understanding of substance abuse and addictions? Do you know that relapses often occur? How do you react?
2. How would you react to a young person telling you that he had been incarcerated? What do you know about treatment in prisons?
3. Would you be able to accept and affirm the young person, offer hope and help and insure confidentiality?
4. Does this story test your views about "who" might use drugs? Do you have or can you develop a resources network to help the young person get professional help?
5. What does this story tell you about the need for a positive father figure?
6. What do you know about children of clergy or professionals? What does this case tell you about the stress placed on youth? How would you react as a parent? As a teacher? Youth worker?
IMPLICATIONS

1. Youth leaders, parents, and school officials need to learn about the drugs commonly abused by youth. It is also important to understand why they are using these drugs. Leaders need to realize that substance abuse is a problem everywhere, regardless of socioeconomic status. It is a serious issue warranting immediate attention.

2. Parents need to be active in their children’s lives and should regularly tell them that they are loved, important, and unique. Often, youth feel they are "disconnected" in their families and groups. Youth workers need to find ways to reconnect youth in a healthy manner. Effective role models should be provided or developed if the father is absent.

3. Clergy and professionals need to guard against serving others at the expense of their own family. Children of clergy or other public officials often feel under pressure from their peers. Clergy and professionals need to guard against serving others at the expense of their own family. Children of clergy or other public officials often feel under pressure from their peers.

4. Youth workers need to reach kids—even after youth detention—in order to instill hope in them and keep them from progressing on to more serious issues, crimes, and lengthy prison sentences.

5. Young people are important, and they need our compassionate and informed help.

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