Understanding Adolescent and Young Adult Denial: Variables From Attachment, Biology, Psychology & Social Systems:

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Don't confuse Denial with Dishonesty:

If your client enters your office or your child comes home with red eyes, alcohol on his breath, slurred speech, and a staggered gait, and you ask them "Have you been drinking alcohol?" And they look back at you and say, "No!" That's not denial; it's dishonesty—lying. And young people know they're lying. It's important not to confuse dishonesty and denial. Denial is when consequences are occurring in their life as a result of their alcohol/drug use, and yet they really can't make the connection to the cause and effect. Their denial will show up as honest self-deception and play out as blame, rationalization and avoidance (1).

Ideally, children express their emotional selves to their caregivers, who mirror back their expressions. This means that they attune to the child's experience. This is done by mirroring and tuning into their children's vocal cues, motor cues, pace of vocalization, expressions, tone of vocal expression, and affective state, along with soothing through warmth and consistent comforting responses. This attunement allows children's emotional development and neurological underpinnings to bloom. In this ideal situation, children's relationship to their internal emotional states allows the freedom to build the parent-child relationship. When the caregiver provides this supportive process, the insula (and other systems) develops and builds the neural networks in the right-hemisphere of the brain, the seat of implicit memory. An unconscious memory forms that it's safe to connect to emotions, experience them, express them, and turn to others for emotional regulation.

In the absence of this attunement experience, these regulatory processes are stunted, which means that children's attachment organization can become disconnected to their internal experiences. They learn that expressing feelings is not okay. In fact, in early childhood, expressing emotions without attunement can lead to shame in the child. At a neurobiological level shame stunts the development of the dopamine system and some of the opiate system, thus leaving the child to find other ways to supplement their missing regulatory neurochemistry. The peak of intoxication is an opiate release and the common denominator in all addicting substances is dopamine.

If the attachment relationship does not allow children to express their feelings, then the children still do whatever it takes to preserve the attachment. In this situation, they learn to stuff, ignore, split off from and avoid verbal expression of their emotions (2), which ultimately results in alexithymia (3) (4). This concept is critical, because being disconnected from emotions fuels denial. The Adolescent Frame of Reference

Young people who long to feel a connection to others are at great risk of falling into the comforting, non-judgmental, welcoming drug culture. Once a relationship to intoxication and the drug culture have developed, users skillfully, yet unconsciously, create a world in which they are surrounded by increasing numbers of people who act as they do, that is, use drugs.

Alexithymia - from Attachment & Development as a Variable Contributing to Denial

Children have a vast capacity for development. Three billion neurons fire in the first year of life and half of them die off by the end of that first year. Early neuro-development, a time in which neurons are blooming and pruning, is experience dependent, meaning that neurons bloom when supported by the caregiver and the environment, but they prune in the absence of support.
Young People Don't Want to Give Up The Rewards

Being high feels good, and brings bio-psycho-social pleasures for the adolescent and young adult drug user:

*Biologically, drugs manipulate soothing neurotransmitters, dopamine, norepinephrine, GABA, serotonin, or endorphins/opiates in a way that creates intoxicating euphoria.
*When they have these neurobiological/psychological experiences with others using, it reinforces a social bond to them and the drug culture. Moreover, this experience medicates, regulates, and soothes unpleasant emotional states for teens and young adults.
*Socially, drug culture is nonjudgmental, accepting, and offers instant brother/sisterhood and even family, thus satisfying the "need to belong."

Young People Have Not Been Allowed To Experience the Consequences of Their Use

Unfortunately, in order to recognize a problem and reach out for help, some drug users need to experience painful consequences on many levels: biological, social, emotional, relational, financial, and/or legal. The recovery community often says that "an addict has to hit bottom before they can accept help." However, those of us who work with adolescent users believe it's our job to work with them and their families to help lift the bottom.

Teens and young adults with drug problems aren't supposed to want to quit, so for many, the impetus for help comes only when one of the systems they deal with doesn't enable them, but yet holds them accountable. These systems include family, friends, school, the legal system, coaches, employers, and so forth. Unfortunately, many within these systems subscribe to the notion that drugs use is a normal part of the teenage and young adult years, thereby making it possible for some to avoid the natural consequences of their use. For example, parents might make excuses to the school, and therapists might make excuses to the probation officers, who in turn make excuses to the judge. Intervening in these systems is an important part of our approach at Recovery Happens Counseling Services as for us to be effective and get good outcomes, it is our belief that we can't just intervene with the individual client alone, we have to include not only the family, but these other systems as well.

References


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