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Guest Editor

“Drugships”: How Kids Make Relationships with Addictive Behaviors

Jamie C. Chambers and Teresa Henrickson

Many youth have more powerful relationships with drugs than with people in their lives. The authors describe connections to chemicals as “drugships.” They offer strength-based principles for helping these youth replace drugships with meaningful relationships.

Raymond enters the group for the first time, head down, dragging his feet. When asked why he’s there, he says, “It wasn’t my idea to come here, it was my mom’s. These groups have done me no good. They’re a waste of my time!”

This is Ray’s third referral to a drug-use prevention program. Marijuana is the love of his life. He has replaced friendships with a “drugship.” The challenge is to reclaim this young man from a life of sex, drugs, and crime. The question is: How do you engage a youth who enjoys drugs and thinks he has no problem? Raymond believes his main difficulty is the adults in his life who demand he quit using drugs simply because he failed his last urinalysis.

Youth like Ray are truly enchanted by substance abuse and other mood-altering behaviors. To build therapeutic alliances with them, we must understand the drug-use culture with which they feel a deep connection. The challenge is nothing less than extricating them from captivity in a subculture that operates outside of mainstream America.

Drugships as Part of a Greater Youth Culture

In *The Disconnected Generation*, Josh McDowell (2000) writes that adolescent aloofness is more than a passing identity crisis, but is becoming an entrenched cultural condition. When the alienation and aloneness of youth is not addressed, the distance they feel from adults is a relational

gulf. Ron Taffel (2001) describes peer drug subcultures as a second family.

Starting in late elementary school, youngsters tend to move away from their own siblings and parents. They surround themselves instead with friends, forming a second family, a separate but equally important system. As kids become more and more attached to their friends and to the common interests they share, by early adolescence it is a natural, easy step to divorce themselves not only from their first families but, often, from other significant adults as well. (p. 17)

When they enter schools and treatment programs, such youth drag with them their drug-use culture. It is often ignored or countered by oppressive treatment cultures that shame and confront kids into submission. This powerful subculture can undo our efforts to help these youth change.

Negative youth subcultures and gangs are found worldwide. Embracing values of freedom without responsibility, they cannot be reached by either permissive or authoritarian approaches (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). Adults can argue, threaten, and pound their chests all they want. The only effective methods involve respectful confrontation and relationship-building (Schwebel, 2002).

Youth like Raymond enter our world committed to a counterculture. The government may be waging a war on

drugs and drug users, but its influence is often invisible to the drug-using youth we meet. Drug use and its lifestyle of cutting school, chasing sex, and committing crimes can be seen as a third person entering the room. In order to personify Ray's "partner," we look at the hold that the drug culture has on such a youth.

The Enchanted Subculture

To those who embrace it, drugship behavior has both rewarding and negative features. The drug subculture offers a place where youth are accepted and claimed. Its many benefits include:

- A shared language
- Rites that become transforming rituals
- Common contacts
- Universal symbols and artifacts
- Shared ideas, beliefs, and core values

Youth wrapped in drugships dare you to challenge their passionate practice of drug-use rituals. Becca, a 16 year old, urges us to "understand before you attempt to help me." Understanding requires a therapeutic alliance. But Becca does not come alone, for this coalition is a triad involving the helper, the youth, and the drugship (Pedersen, 2000). The drugship is treated as a third party in the conversation. The power and influence of the drugship over the lives of students can be assessed and changed. Through this coalition, we help youth reformulate and reach their goals.

The Anatomy of a Drugship

Alexia and her group were discussing the definition of a friendship versus the kind of destructive relationships she was involved in while using. They defined a friendship as "a relationship between two people where their relationship with each other is primary." She and her group came up with the term "drugship," and they defined it as "a relationship between two or more kids where drug use and drug-use activity are primary." We have elaborated on the concept of drugships based on conversations with several drug-using youth:

- "I date her/him because she/he will get me high, drunk, or stoned."
- "I hang out with them because they always have something to use."
- "I have sex with people so I won't have to pay for my alcohol and drugs."
- "I hang out with people who use because I know I'll be accepted and admired."

- "Drugs seem to be more important than those people or events that used to be important to me."

Psychiatrist William Glasser (1998) characterized drug-using youth as unhappy people who have abandoned relationships for nonhuman pleasure. They pursue quick, intense pleasure, which requires nothing more than getting the drug in their bloodstreams. Other people are only useful as a conduit for drugs. In a drugship, youth trade relationships with people for relationships with things. Eighteen-year-old Marty reported, "Being committed to getting high is like being in an abusive marriage." He tearfully confessed, "And it's just as hard for me to get out of as it is for a woman to leave a violent man."

Elements of a Drugship

The first clue that a young person is becoming enchanted with chemicals is that drug use becomes one of life's organizing principles. Robert and Mary McAuliffe (1975) have described the pervasiveness of these drugships. The accompanying table on page 132 is adapted from their work.

Youth in drugships have a host of related concerns including health, sexual orientation, employment, living conditions, and involvement with the mental health or criminal justice system. They do not do well in traditional deficit-oriented treatment programs. Therefore, treatment providers or educators must attend to the many factors that contribute to the young person's current situation (Winters, 1999). This entails moving away from finding pathology and fixing flaws to approaches that build on strengths and potentials.

Unraveling the Drugship

Before treatment happens, a youth must be motivated to change. Tammy Bell (1990) identifies ways to help kids see that chemical use is a problem:

1. Examining problems in living
2. Examining the development of substance abuse or dependence
3. Exploring the relationship between problems and substance abuse
4. Using crisis situations to motivate requests for help

Once the "marriage," as Marty described it, is recognized as abusive and uninhabitable, we can begin to facilitate a divorce. This is a challenge because youth caught in the web of a drugship often react in ways that confirm the belief that the drug trance is better than the painful relationship problems that triggered their addictive behavior. Unraveling the power of drugships involves changing entrenched patterns of thinking, feeling, and behavior. Dealing with youth

Table 1. Elements of a Drugship (Adapted from McAuliffe & McAuliffe, 1975)

ELEMENTS	DEFINITIONS	RESULTING CONDITIONS
Unmanageability	Loss of control. Youth can't change, quit, or see that substance abuse is harmful. Sees no connection between using and negative effects on life.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Belief in personal control over situations. 2. Guilt, anxiety, depression, intentional or accidental suicidal behavior. 3. Occasional awareness results in fear. 4. Periods of ambivalence, ambiguity, indecisiveness, procrastination.
Distorting	Lies of commission or omission and twisted details are intended to convince both the youth and others that life is under control.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Physical and emotional feelings blocked. 2. Contact with reality, including intellectual perception, understanding, reasoning, forethought, decision-making, and judgment is impaired. 3. Reality shaped to fit twisted perspective and pushed further from the youth's grasp.
Protectiveness	Defensive of type, extent of involvement. Distrustful of those who don't use or who interfere with using. Elaborate defenses, attitudes, cognitive traps, disguises.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nondrug-using relationships bombarded with poisonous projections. 2. Family members and straight friends feel guilt, remorse. 3. Confusing, infrequent displays of remorse. 4. Separation from others. 5. Youth locked in drugship culture.
Addict's Identity	Declining moral behavior. Nagging awareness of guilt, anxiety. Defensive of irresponsible, disrespectful behavior. Enjoys idolization, idolizing others with Addict's Identity.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Severe internal conflict between personal values and conduct. 2. Self-alienation. 3. Sociopathic coping style. 4. Uncaring, disqualifying behavior, attitudes. 5. Moral anxiety, feelings of worthlessness.
Compulsiveness	Strong emotional urge to use chemicals. Rituals of using have an almost hypnotic power.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Impulsive loss of control over drug use, drug activities. 2. Self-destructiveness. 3. Impaired ability to detect damage. 4. Unconscious thrust toward negativism, suicide.
Addict's Attitude	Negative, suspicious, distrustful. Negative emotions lead to negative behavior and responses. Attitude helps justify hurtful behavior.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Desocialization. 2. Disoriented, disordered, disintegrated relationships. 3. Paranoia, self-centeredness, negativism. 4. Withdrawal from community life. 5. Depersonalized situation. 6. Obsessed with negative ideas, judgments, opinions, fantasies, and memories. 7. Negating, nullifying feelings toward self, others. 8. Self- and other-destructive.
Preoccupation	Thinking is characterized by remembering past good times or imagining future good and better drug-using times. Day-to-day thinking involves preparing for, enjoying, or recovering from using. "I have lost interest in other activities, and I'm not as effective at doing other things besides using."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Intellect, memory, perception, insight, understanding, reasoning impaired. 2. Rational forethought, judgment, decision-making impaired. 3. Apathy, indecision, procrastination. 4. Recollections of drug use experiences dominate memories. 5. Imagination loses dynamic creative power, bombarded with fantasies of future drug use experiences.
Spell-Based Beliefs	Drug use takes priority as user imagines abilities are enhanced by chemicals. Beliefs about using, users and non-users affect emotions, thoughts, behavior.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Depersonalization of all life tasks. 2. Loss of self-awareness, self-respect, self-esteem, positive self-identity. 3. Desocialization, irresponsibility. 4. Other areas of life unmanageable. 5. Responsibilities shifted to others.

usually requires family involvement. Family treatment can also give parents the optimism and skills to cope with challenges in raising their teens (Winters, 1999).

Ethnographic Interventions

The science of anthropology offers a model for respectfully entering the world created by our young clients. The use of ethnography literally creates a picture of our study group's way of life. The ethnographer's tools are vital to youth workers, teachers, and counselors. They are: participation-observation, interviewing, utilizing written records and analysis, and collecting nonwritten records (Wolcott, 1988). Active participation gives us a chance to be an influence. As ethnographic interventionists, we can rely on these strategies when engaging youth who are caught in drugships:

1. One-Downsmanship

Most youth captivated by drugships will approach us from adversarial positions. It is not acceptable to respond in the same manner. As adults, we must disengage from our tendency to rely on our power. Instead, we must use our curiosity about the youth's story. She becomes the teacher on the subject of her experience in developing a drugship. We become the students, asking questions and reflecting what we see. Our job is to make observations and form tentative hypotheses about the meaning of drug-related behaviors.

2. Unearthing Strengths

Behavior can be best understood in its social context (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry 1987). Seen in context, all behavior is purposeful or goal directed. Alfred Adler talked about the importance of understanding goals: "If we know the goal of a person, we can undertake to explain and to understand ... how his character traits, his feelings and emotions, and his logic, must be constituted" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 196).

Recognizing that behavior follows this socially goal-directed thrust, we seek to unearth strengths using the technique of reframing. Even shabby drugship behavior serves some social purpose which provides a clue to positive alternative behavior (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974; Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982).

3. Storytelling and Re-Authored Kids' Stories

Looking at substance abuse as a relationship helps a youth create an external identity separate from addiction. We ask kids to imagine their drug use as a person. Pete, a blond-haired 16-year-old retorted, "You want me to do what?" We restate the request, "If your drinking was a person, what would his or her name be?" Pete, with an understanding grin, snapped, "It's Bud!"

His drug of choice was beer, and his favorite was Budweiser™. For the first time, Pete could see himself in a relationship.

Using this metaphor sharpens awareness of the invasive control drugships have over one's life. With this recognition, we also now have the chance to cooperate with the young person in developing a new story or reauthoring their story (White & Epston, 1990; Smith & Nylund, 1997). We later asked Pete how his life would change if he could get away from "Bud." He responded, "Maybe I could do school and make something of myself. I wouldn't be tired during the day and violent at night."

4. Decoding the Meaning of Behavior

Kids are the philosophers of our times. They purposefully move and interact with their world, always mapping meaning. Sometimes their behavior makes sense to them, but those in drugships often report having no rhyme or reason for their behavior. Decoding involves teaching students to recognize specific thoughts and feelings that drive their inappropriate behaviors and building their strength and confidence to break free from self-defeating patterns (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001).

The first level of decoding is reflecting the emotion hidden beneath the youth's words and behavior. The second level is connecting feelings to specific actions. The third level of decoding, which is crucial in unraveling drugships, is recognizing denial and distortion. We must help youth get beyond their pain and defensive behavior.

Searching together for the meaning of behavior enhances trust between youth and adult. The young person learns that the adult is understanding and willing to suspend judgment. Youth begin to recognize how their thinking and feelings are related to their drug-use behavior and destructive behavior. As they become disentangled from drugships, they discover they are worthy of friendships.

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