



# EPIDEMIC

In the age of a global pandemic and widespread media consumption, modern teenagers have a unique experience with drug usage.

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## Disclaimer: The blunt on the cover page is photoshopped from paper towels, and the models photographed do not represent the anonymous sources.

The stress of school tugs you down with every step you take. Your body itches for some relief from the tension. During on-line classes, the black screen could easily hide the stench and smoke. Now, the dismissal bell is the only relief in sight. Last week, you promised yourself to stick to two smokes a week, and you have already reached that limit. But nothing can stop you from thinking about that next high.

High school students have been exposed to drug usage for decades. Drug culture has persisted and evolved through the pandemic, appearing both in school and mainstream media.

### EXPOSURE

According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, 46.6% of teens have tried illicit drugs at least once by the time they are in 12th grade. High school drug culture is ever-evolving, whether due to the popularity of certain drugs or changes in the people using them. In recent years, substance use among 12- to 17-year-olds has generally been on the decline, according to Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated this trend.

The first anonymous West High student source attributes the decline to a lack of accessibility to drugs while at home.

"During quarantine, everybody's at home ... and I assume your parents wouldn't want to buy you [drugs]," they said.

The onset of the pandemic had drastic impacts on virtually every aspect of how people live. Among a flood of statistics, one data point has stood out: an increase in people experiencing mental health issues. In the context of drug usage, a CDC report found that 13.3% of adult survey respondents started or increased substance use to cope with stress or emotions related to the pandemic. Statistics among teens, however, tell a whole different story. Despite increased mental health concerns among teens, 2021 saw the largest decline in adolescent use of illicit drugs in 46 years.

"[The] data was actually really interesting over the past year with Covid ... where you spend

most of your time has changed as far as being in school around peers versus being at home," said Andrea Weber, assistant director of addiction medicine at the University of Iowa.

Despite nationwide studies that indicate otherwise, some students at West have observed a local increase in drug use.

"I do know a lot of people that started smoking during the pandemic, which I'm not surprised by," the second anonymous source said.

A third anonymous student also believes drug usage rose among peers during the pandemic due to the lack of structure throughout online school.

"It allowed me to smoke during the day when I wanted to," they said. "I think a lot of people started during the pandemic ... you're bored at home; what else is there to do?"

National Institute on Drug Abuse Director Nora Volkow expressed uneasiness about the future of drug culture among teens in an interview with Time. According to Volkow, the downward trend in drug usage may reverse in the coming years due to easing pandemic restrictions and more frequent gatherings.

Despite the pandemic's effects, other factors shape drug use in high school. The first anonymous source describes West's drug culture as widespread and far-reaching.

"It's all over the place," they said. "There are people ... literally everywhere I can think of. It's not just exclusive to one group."

As an athlete, the fourth anonymous source believes drug culture exists within athletics at West despite the possibility of athletes getting suspended from the team if they are found to be using drugs.

"The fact that wanting to do [drugs] can outweigh risking losing the sport that you like doing is kind of ... crazy, even though I have taken that risk," they said.

Some students bring their drug use into the school building. The fourth anonymous source has observed it in many places, including bathroom stalls and the parking lot. However, they avoid using drugs during the school day due to their concerns about focusing in class.

"I don't like how it makes me feel because I just zone out, and I don't get anything done," they

said.

The third anonymous student has occasionally left the building to get high.

"During lunchtimes or ... when I [didn't] need to use my open, I would go outside ... and bring my pipe to school with me," they said. "I'd smoke during lunchtime or AFT."

If a student is caught partaking in drugs on school grounds, consequences vary on a case-by-case basis.

According to the 2021-2022 West High School student handbook, they may need to participate in a substance abuse rehabilitation program, be suspended, expelled, referred to a local police department or be required to comply with alternative courses of action that are agreed to by students and guardians.

Some teens are motivated to start using drugs despite the consequences in place. According to Sandstone Care, which offers drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, teens try drugs primarily due to peer pressure, mental health struggles, the desire to improve performance, experimentation and the wish to feel grown-up.

The first anonymous source turned to drugs to cope with losing people in their life.

"I started doing drugs because ... I didn't really know what to do at the time," they said. "I didn't want to do weed because it'd smell ... so I started taking pills."

With a growing prevalence of mental health disorders among young people, drugs can seem like a way out. The fourth anonymous source was sent to the emergency room after a marijuana overdose partially caused by mental health issues.

"I think I was in a bad place then mentally, so I did use [marijuana] sort of as an escape," they said.

Some students try drugs simply out of curiosity.

"I have a friend who started doing pills just for the fun of it," the first anonymous source said. "He got addicted to them, and now he takes [Xanax] during school. It's pretty messed up."

Peer pressure can also influence students to use drugs. A typical place that teens may encounter drug usage is at parties.

"If you go to a party, you're going to see a lot of



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**-THIRD ANONYMOUS SOURCE**

## EDITORIAL POLICY

*Sources may wish to have their names withheld from a particular story, and some may have valid reasons for this. The Editorial Board will decide on a case by case basis whether anonymity may be granted to protect the source, referencing NPR's anonymous source guidance, and sources must be verified with the publication's editor-in-chief. The Board recognizes that a high school is a very confined community of young people, and that some topics, while important to the community, may involve public embarrassment and official sanctions if names are printed. Once anonymity is granted, the Board must stand behind its decision, whatever the pressure. This, therefore, is a weighty decision.*

people [who] will usually bring some pills or alcohol or shrooms or acid or something like that," the first anonymous source said. "You don't want to be the odd one out, so you start doing drugs."

The third anonymous source also attests to the popularity of drugs at parties.

"Almost every public party is going to have something; there has to be something to attract the party people, and typically, it's drugs," they said.

Party culture is enhanced by the fact that Iowa City is a college town.

"I would always go downtown with my friends and we would make our way into college parties," the third anonymous source said. "There was one party that I was at where we were all inside and [a group of college students] said, 'Let's go outside and smoke.'"

The first anonymous source believes that proximity to the university and the party culture increases accessibility to illegal substances and alcohol.

"Here in Iowa City, drinking is everywhere. At parties, drugs and alcohol are everywhere," they said. "You just have to find the right people."

This availability helped establish a drug culture at West often subject to broader trends in drug popularity. For example, the increased interest in psychedelics within the scientific community over the past several years is reflected among students.

"Psychedelics have grown a lot," the first anonymous source said. "A lot of people want to do ... things that make [them] see stuff."

From what the first anonymous source has observed, there seems to be an overall interest in new and unfamiliar substances among students at West.

"I used to deal drugs here at West and a lot of people want to do ... exotic stuff. Like the new things," they said.

They have also noticed a recent decrease in the number of students who vape.

"A lot of people don't like to vape anymore," they said. "During school, if I go to the bathroom, I'll rarely see anyone vape ... two years ago, it was a completely different story."

One thing that has seemingly stayed consistent throughout the past few years is the popularity of marijuana.

"I haven't seen a decline [in marijuana use] and I haven't seen an increase, either," the first anonymous source said. "It's just easy to get. It's cheap."

Kristin Brack, the Student Advisory Center Coordinator at West High, also recognizes the prevalence of marijuana.

"Marijuana is a really, really big substance that's very popular," Brack said. "Since it is kind of close to being legalized, I think people just think that it's okay to just go ahead and use it recreationally."

Although recreational marijuana is not legal in Iowa, it is legal in 18 states. The first anonymous source also believes legalization in some states has caused students to feel more comfortable using marijuana.

"All of my friends have smoked weed," they said. "They see that other states are accepting it so they think it's fine. It's just becoming a drug that we can all accept slowly into our lives."

## TRANSMISSION

"Drugs are kind of cool," Rue, the main character in HBO's hit dramatization of high school life, "Euphoria," said. "I mean, they're cool before they wreck your skin, and your life, and your family. That's when they get uncool. It's actually a very narrow window of cool."

"Euphoria" depicts the reasons behind why teenagers turn to drugs and the negative consequences of using them. The series demonstrates that teenagers, like Rue, sometimes turn to drugs to momentarily relieve themselves from the pain of a mental health issue while others try drugs out of curiosity. The serious possibility and danger of overdosing is also illustrated.

Displaying drug usage in the media, such as "Euphoria" does, produces various reactions from viewers. Most commonly, the response is either disapproval for the mere depiction of drug use or praise for the realism shown.

Upon its release on HBO, D.A.R.E. — the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program — denounced "Euphoria" for glamorizing and normalizing drug use.

The second anonymous source agrees with the conclusion drawn by D.A.R.E.

"Everyone on that show is beautiful," the second anonymous source said. "Making beautiful people do drugs makes the drugs look more beautiful."

The first anonymous source had a similar interpretation of the effect the portrayal of drug usage in "Euphoria" has on teenagers.

"They don't think it's bad at all," the first anonymous source said. "They just think it's normal — any teen is doing it — at least that's how 'Euphoria' portrays it."

The third anonymous source further elaborates on the perspective that television shows are not realistic.

"[Students] have this idea that they're going to go into high school and do drugs, and they'll be able to get away with it every day," they said. "That's not realistic at all."

Comparatively, Weber believes television shows that exhibit drug usage are not glamorizing the act, but instead illustrating reality.

"I would say that in many ways, I think 'Eu-



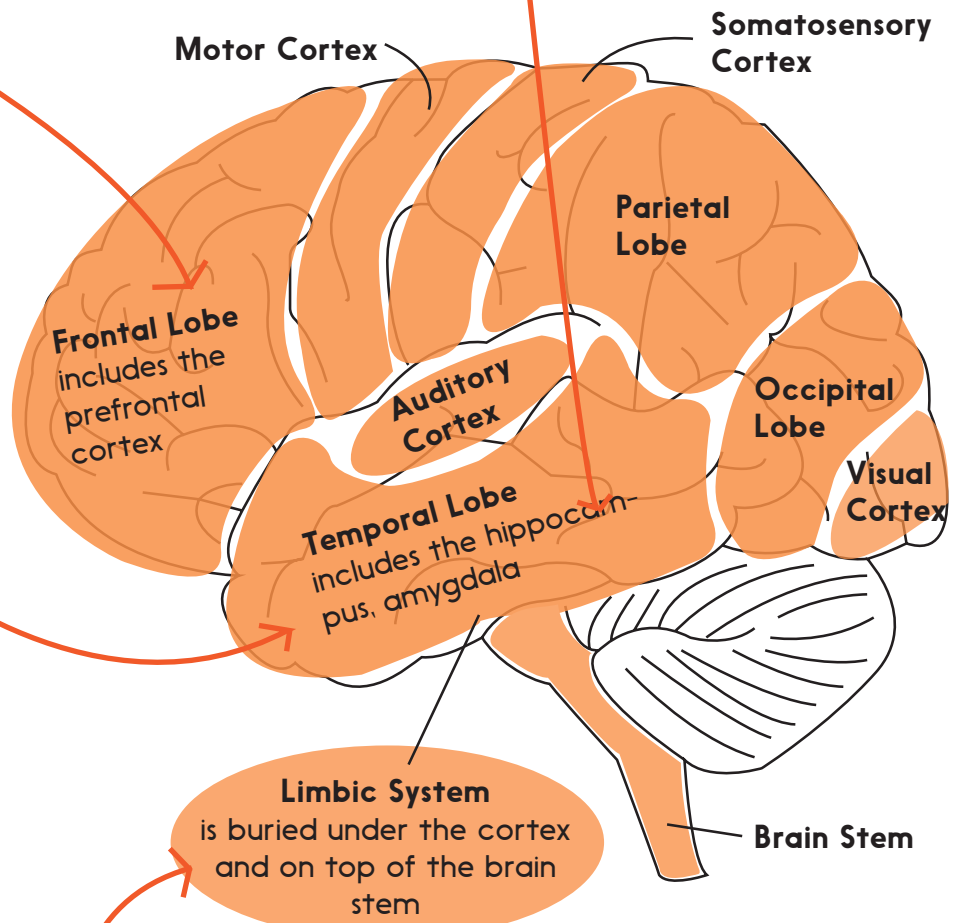


# DRUGS, INCLUDING MARIJUANA, XANAX, FENTANYL AND PSYCHEDELICS, HAVE DRASTIC SHORT AND LONG TERM EFFECTS ON THE BRAIN.

## PSYCHEDELICS:

Psychedelics are a class of psychoactive substances that cause changes in mood, perception and cognitive processes. They often cause "trippy" effects and hallucinations. Psychedelics operate differently in the brain than addictive drugs, and there is ongoing research about their potential mental health benefits. However, they pose many risks, from psychological trauma to organ damage.

**MARIJUANA:** Marijuana, also known as cannabis, is a drug containing THC, which stimulates neurons to release dopamine at higher levels than average. Marijuana can result in altered senses, impaired judgment and poor motor coordination, all of which can have detrimental effects on driving. Using marijuana as a teenager poses risks in terms of brain development and learning.



**XANAX:** Xanax is a sedative prescription drug for people suffering from anxiety and/or panic disorders. However, when used improperly, it can cause the very problem it was meant to solve — depression — due to the drug's negative impacts on the amygdala and hippocampus. Misuse can also result in decreased inhibitions, coordination and concentration, as well as increased irritability, confusion, hallucinations, paranoid delusions and suicidal thoughts.

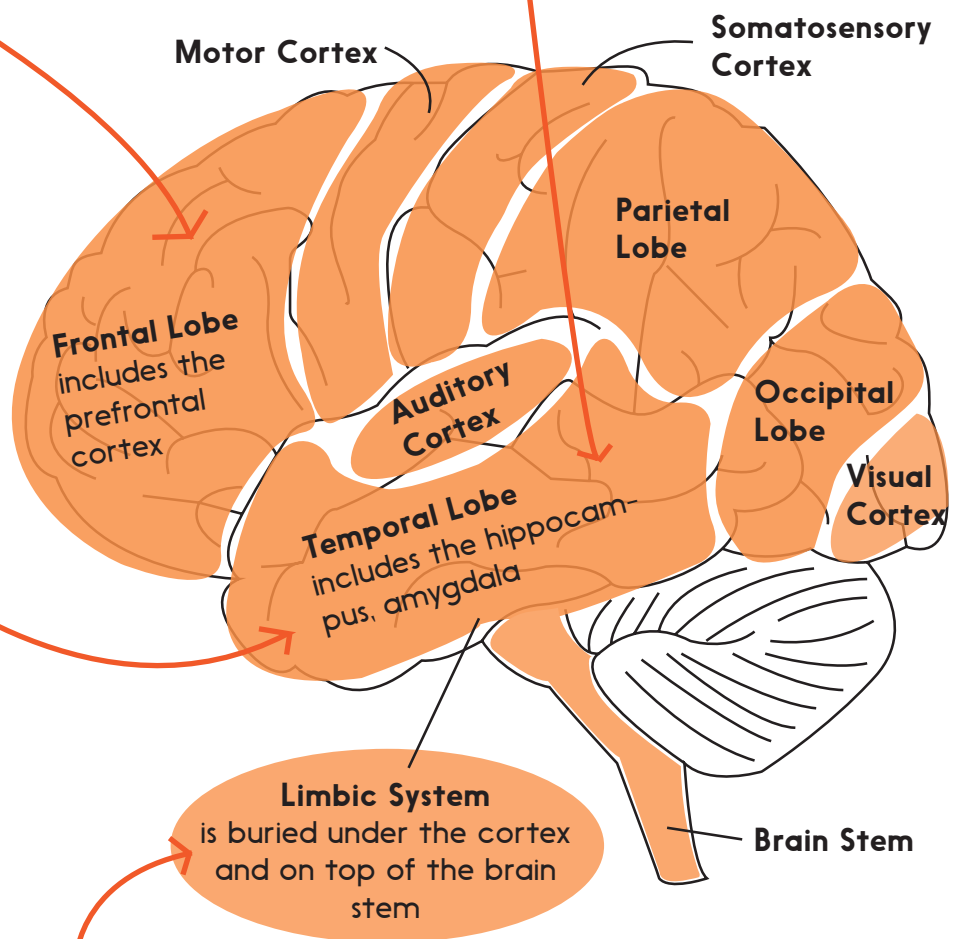
**FENTANYL:** Fentanyl is a narcotic opioid prescribed to individuals in intense pain. It works by latching onto the opioid receptors of the brain, which in turn causes intense fatigue. Fentanyl is commonly used to lace other drugs, so people experience the effects of the drug without knowing that they have taken it. Due to the high likelihood of fentanyl overdoses, it is crucial that Narcan, an opioid overdose treatment, is available when consuming fentanyl.

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phoria’ provides a very accurate representation of what substance use can be like for people,” Weber said.

Don McLeese, an associate professor who has developed courses in culture and entertainment media at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, says that correlation between people watching shows like “Euphoria” and those doing drugs does not necessarily indicate causation.

“If pop culture reflects the fact that kids are having sex before marriage or teenage pregnancy or using drugs, it isn’t necessarily telling you that that’s what you should go out and do,” McLeese said. “It’s describing what is. I mean, part of the power of art is to be able to turn a mirror onto reality to show things the way they are.”

In regards to “Euphoria” specifically, Weber thinks the adverse consequences of drug usage are properly expressed.

“I feel like they showed a lot of the negative impact that substance use had on the characters’ lives,” Weber said. “If you separate the actors and the celebrity from ‘Euphoria,’ and you actually are talking about the character representation in ‘Euphoria,’ I think in some ways it actually does a lot of justice to some of the harms that can come from substance use.”

However, even with the ramifications of drug use shown in “Euphoria,” the fourth anonymous source admits that feeling similar emotions as

the television characters feel can compel people to participate in the same coping mechanisms as the characters, even if they are clearly dangerous acts.

“I think if you can relate to the characters, you can almost want to do it because they’re doing it and you feel how they feel, so you think it would help,” they said.

Although opposing points of view exist when it comes to the effects of drug usage in television, people generally believe social media negatively influences users through its depiction of drugs.

A survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2018 of roughly 750 people, aged 13 to 17 years old, reported that 97% use a social media platform such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat, which exposes many teenagers to drug usage on social media and can influence them to partake in the illegal activities as well.

Brack helps students with their emotional, social and behavioral health needs on a daily basis. She recognizes the strong pull that drug usage on social media has on teenagers.

“I feel like social media and group chatting is such a huge thing,” Brack said. “One person has access to [drugs], and then they’re on a group chat with a group of people that are using or see other pictures of people using on Snapchat or whatever. I just feel like it kind of snowballs.”

Social media and drug usage influence each other in a cyclic fashion. A social media post

with a reference to drugs, whether it is posted by a celebrity or an acquaintance, can instantly spark interest in an individual scrolling through the platform. Curiosity can quickly develop into experimentation. Trying out one drug and posting about it keeps the cycle going.

In 2011, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University conducted a study of 2000 people aged 12 to 17. The study disclosed that 75% of the teenagers surveyed stated that observing photos of teens partying with alcohol or marijuana on social media sites influences them to party similarly.

The third anonymous source supports this finding with their own experience.

“Most of what I learned at first was from social media,” they said. “So, I think that had I not been on it as much as I was, then I don’t think I would have been inclined to try it.”

## RECOVERY

According to the Mayo Clinic, addiction is defined as “a disease that affects a person’s brain behavior and leads to an inability to control the use of a legal or illegal drug.” Also known as substance use disorder, addiction causes people to continue to use drugs despite knowing the consequences.

Due to the psychological toll that addiction takes on the brain, many punishments for drug usage are ineffective. The second anonymous source does not believe that police intervention is an impactful punishment for students.

“I feel like talking to the police is not going to help anything. They’re just going to stick their noses in everybody’s business and cause more trouble than it’s worth,” the source said. “If you really want to show them a lesson, call the cops. But I don’t think it is going to do anything besides ruin that kid’s day.”

The third anonymous source believes that suspension from school is just as counterproductive as police intervention.

“Suspension isn’t going to do anything. If anything, these kids go home and then they just get to do it more,” the source said. “If I were to get suspended, I’m not going to stop smoking.”

Regardless of the punishment students receive, the first anonymous source believes that it is up





to them to be responsible for their own actions and consequences.

“You can’t change people unless people want to change themselves,” they said.

Weber hopes that proper education will develop and be useful for students who are surrounded by drugs and have to make decisions for themselves.

“Ultimately, it’d be a choice that [adolescents] need to make for themselves,” Weber said. “Information is power, especially when it’s coming from the right, accurate sources.”

The majority of students at West have taken three courses that include drug usage in the curriculum: Personal Development 7 and 8 in junior high and Health in high school. The first anonymous source feels these classes have a minimal impact on student drug usage.

“I like the intentions that West High has, trying to show kids what drugs can do to [them]. But if a kid wants to smoke, they’re gonna smoke,” the source said. “It didn’t have an impact on me and I just shrugged it off.”

Brack previously worked at the Prelude Behavioral Services in Iowa City, where a central mission is to provide resources to people who are struggling with substance use. Brack specifically worked in education surrounding drugs and alcohol. During her time at Prelude, education around drug usage centered around abstinence, or avoiding drugs completely.

“As far as vaping or tobacco, there’s no safe amount for teens to use. So [safe use of those drugs] is not something that we talk about,” Brack said.

However, in regards to alcohol, Prelude has a program called Prime For Life, which prepares young adults to be safe when surrounded by alcohol.

“We taught a program which spoke about once you become 21, and it’s legal to drink, what does that look like?” Brack said. “The educational component is fantastic because there’s such a myth around when somebody says they are drinking responsibly. They have no clue what that means.”

Weber believes older generations have done an inadequate job developing substance use education. She thinks health classes should focus more on safety measures rather than scare tactics.

“Abstinence education about drugs has never worked,” Weber said. “[My generation does] a huge disservice to your generation by not providing you guys with all the information and tools in a very accurate, concise way that allows you to make better choices about your brains and your bodies.”

Weber believes there is a false notion that lack

of information equals less curiosity about drug usage.

“I think a lot of how we teach adolescents about drugs is based on stigma and this belief that if we don’t provide you guys with education about how to do stuff safely, that you’re just not going to do it,” Weber said.

The second anonymous source also believes drug education should shift its focus to safety and accurate information about drugs.

“I think we could do more drug education, but instead of hammering it in to not do drugs, teach kids responsible ways to do them and what to do when they’re in a very real and scary situation,” they said.

According to the Alcohol and Drug Foundation, the techniques that provide the most impactful drug education are appropriately timed with accurate information, build skills like decision-making and are relevant to real life.

Weber believes drug education is vital in the high school years due to the impressionability during adolescent development.

“For adolescents, in particular, there’s this variable that does not exist for adults. Their brains are developing and are wonderful things that are still undergoing tons of changes that can be impacted by various substance exposure,” Weber said.

The teenage brain is more susceptible to substance abuse because the pleasure centers of the brain develop more rapidly than the parts of the brain involved in making decisions. According to the CDC, drug usage at these adolescent ages is likely to affect the growth of teens, occur simultaneously with other risky behaviors and lead to the development of adult health problems, such as heart disease and sleep disorders.

West High has compiled resources for students who are struggling with substance abuse. Brack recommends reaching out to a trusted adult in the building to get access to these resources. Once connected with an adult, students can receive quick access to medical attention, support groups, therapy or rehab programs.

When students approach Student Family Advocate Christine Dougan with substance abuse issues, the cause is often mental health issues. From these interactions, Dougan believes the core focus to mitigate substance use should be on student mental health and providing adequate resources in response to the pandemic.

“I think we are in a unique sort of global experience the last couple years ... the world is literally and metaphorically on fire. Our school structure looks the exact same as it did pre-COVID: same amount of guidance counselors, same amount of SFAs, same amount of teachers and same school day,” Dougan said. “So we’re all

experiencing this collective trauma, and we’re proceeding as if [we’re] not.”

Despite the lack of adjustments made in response to the pandemic, the third anonymous source believes it is vital to understand the significance of drug addiction.

“You’re going to be putting aside your own values because that’s what addiction does,” they said. “It grows on you. It grows on you like a tumor, and it’ll latch on to you.”

## RESOURCES

If you or someone you know is struggling with substance abuse

- **Reach out to one of West’s student family advocates:**

dougan.christine@  
iowacityschools.org

gudenkauf.anna@  
iowacityschools.org

- **Contact Prelude Behavioral Services to ask for their services in therapy and rehabilitation:**

(319) 351-4357

- **If in need of immediate assistance, reach out to local health services or the National Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services administration hotline:**

1-800-662-4357

