



**DART Prevention Coalition**  
Taking Aim at Substance Use in Ocean County

# Youth Mental Health and Substance Use: The Connection



## Adults vs. Youth

Being a young person can be stressful and this can sometimes lead youth to drugs and alcohol for reprieve. Unlike adults, using substances at a young age can have detrimental impacts on brain development and can hinder important areas of development such as decision making. Youth with mental health disorders are more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol and thus more likely to develop substance use concerns.

## The Adolescent Brain

The human brain is not fully developed until around age 25. When individuals younger than 25 use drugs or alcohol, it increases their risk for dependency and addiction. For example, if a youth begins using alcohol regularly around the age of 16, they have a higher likelihood of developing alcohol use disorder than someone who starts in their 30s. It is important to talk to young people about how their brain development can be impacted by early substance use and the potential long-term risks.

## Mental Health and Substance Use: The Connection

Aside from experimentation, youth may turn to substances as a way to manage mental health challenges. Youth who experience anxiety or depression, may feel as though their mind “quiets” for a time after using a substance, making them more susceptible to continued use. Youth who are diagnosed with ADHD or social anxiety may feel that using a substance allows them to calm themselves and may be, or appear to be, more social or comfortable in social situations. However, substances do not provide long-term symptom relief and may increase symptoms.

## Healthy Alternatives to Substances

While many youth with mental health struggles may find temporary relief in using substances, there is a likelihood that engaging with substances will increase their mental health symptoms. Educating young people on healthy coping skills will give them the tools to seek healthy alternatives to substances in moments when life is difficult or stressful.

Coping skills are not one-size-fits-all. It is important to find ones that work for you! Some examples of healthy coping skills may include:

1. Exercising or moving your body - walking, running, biking or dancing
2. Breathing exercises or meditation
3. Journaling or talking through things with a trusted peer or adult
4. Doing something creative - drawing, painting, singing, dancing, cooking or baking
5. Reading or listening to podcasts or music



Scan the QR code or visit  
[rwjbh.org/IFPRMentalHealthKit](https://rwjbh.org/IFPRMentalHealthKit) to  
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### Source:

Miller, C. (2022, June 5). Mental health disorders and teen substance use. Child Mind Institute.  
<https://childmind.org/article/mental-health-disorders-and-substance-use/>