

Episode 71: Substance use during the pandemic

Reporters Ethan Quezada and Yoko Vue speak with a student and academic experts about substance use in relation to the pandemic.

Ethan Quezada and Yoko Vue

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INTRO MUSIC

YOKO VUE: Hello everyone, I'm Yoko Vue.

ETHAN QUEZADA: And I'm Ethan Quezada, and you're listening to "In The Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

VUE: As the country navigates the current rise in COVID-19 cases, we're reminded of the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety that came about during the first wave of the pandemic. So much has changed in the past eight months — and as a society we've had to learn to adapt to our new, isolating circumstances.

QUEZADA: Some people tried new things to cope like starting a new anime, learning how to skate, or reading a new book. For some students, however, coping with stress and boredom started to look like rolling up that second joint or drinking a little more than usual.

VUE: For this episode, Ethan and I will be taking a closer look at the relationships that students have with stress, substance use, addiction and the pandemic, as well as providing a little insight into what struggling with these issues look like.

QUEZADA: We start with Juan, a graphic design major who is in his senior year.

JUAN: I feel like it was stressful in the beginning, because obviously, it was a lot of unknowns, so no one knew what's going on. So, we're just like, waiting to see where we're gonna go. So I guess the stress of the unknown is what got to me.



QUEZADA: Being stressed out is nothing new to college students, but people handle this stress differently.

JUAN: So I just watch a little TV or like, just ignore my responsibilities a little bit. Because that's, I knew, those were the major things that caused me stress. So as long as I could forget about them a little bit. It was nice.

QUEZADA: As the pandemic started to get worse, he also picked up new ways to unwind.

JUAN: In the beginning I was alone, a lot of my roommates had gone home, once everything was changing. But since I had a lot more free time, I tried to pick up some habits, like exercising and like started to read more. But also started, like, using a lot more substance because of the fact, the same fact that I had a lot more time on my hands.

QUEZADA: Juan said that, while he would use substances once in a while before the pandemic, his usage started to increase after it had begun.

JUAN: I've noticed that me and my friends were drinking a lot more because of the fact that there was a lot more free time so were like, "Oh hey, come over. Like, let's just drink let's day drink, or let's just get high." It was just nice to get away from the world, but also like, since because of the fact that I have started smoking more it has become a part of my daily routine that wasn't there before pre-pandemic, like I said I used it for stress, but that was like random moments, like "I'm too stressed this day, so I'll smoke now." But now it's just like every day I do it. I've noticed some of my closest friends that they have been smoking a lot more, drinking a lot more and sometimes we plan times to just do the same thing like, "Oh get high, get drunk." So I feel like the pandemic hasn't really helped with the substance abuse, I guess, because from what I've seen there has been a lot more people using it in their daily lives.

QUEZADA: Juan also talked about his feelings towards his new substance use patterns, and how he came to use more.

JUAN: I think for me, it was the convenience, because the way that I smoked, it was easy to take a hit every two seconds. Like, you get high like within minutes, and you just go about a day just relaxing

QUEZADA: Sometimes substance use can lead to a dependency, especially when it becomes a habit, but when asked whether he had an addiction, Juan felt he was in the clear.

JUAN: I honestly Don't think so. Because I don't see it as like a bad thing I can see as like part of like, identity like who I am I guess, um, because weed and stuff like that did become a lot more legal in some states and countries- not countries, but like yes states... for example in the drink- like people can drink like after day's work like a glass of wine, that drink is not gonna lead to anything that. So that's how I see it.

QUEZADA: In Juan's case, he does not characterize his relationship as a dependency. For others with similar experiences, this may not necessarily be the case, as relationships with substance are very personal.

VUE: For those experiencing substance abuse, the pandemic has made staying sober more difficult. Erika Statzel, the director of nursing at Greenhouse Treatment Centers, said she's seen a lot of patients come into her clinic because they relapsed during quarantine.

ERIKA STATZEL: I would say maybe about 80% of our population that we see upon admission are coming in due to relapse, the quarantine and COVID are the reason why they were triggered to relapse and a lot of that has to do with boredom. Also, too, if you can remember we first went into quarantine, a lot of things shut down. These individuals didn't have those support groups that they were used to; they were going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings every Wednesday or every Friday, you know, they had that repetition, doing Celebrate Recovery, whatever kind of support groups they had — and that was just shut down. And then you're left with, you're furloughed from your job. So you're at home, you're bored.

VUE: Relieving this boredom may feel good in the moment, but she also said that using depressants like alcohol when experiencing depression is a vicious cycle in your head.

STATZEL: But in the long run, like I said, it's very detrimental to everything. So just having that line and knowing your work it being in college, are you able to get up out of bed and go to classes? Is your attendance suffering? Are you able to socialize appropriately with other students without having to have something to drink or smoke or whatever it may be? Being able to recognize that really, in the beginning, making sure it doesn't get out of line.

VUE: Knowledge about addiction, prevention and recovery are essential. We spoke to Dr. Ruben Baler, a health scientist at the National Institute on Drug Abuse, who had a lot to say about these topics.

RUBEN BALER: The brain uses the same mechanisms it uses to learn things like how to ride a bike, or your multiplication tables, the same learning method mechanisms are the same ones that are used for the brain to learn that a particular drug is very reinforcing. It's a very rewarding experience.

QUEZADA: Dr. Baler said addiction is also similar to riding a bike.

BALER: It's something that you learn in such a profound way, your brain does it automatically, almost like a habit. It's impossible not to ride a bike, if you're put on a bike, you will go out and ride with it. So the same mechanism, the same phenomenon is with addictions. Once the brain really learns what the drug can do for you. In terms of your mood, your automatic behaviors, your empathy to others, depending on the drug, your well being, your euphoria, then it's very difficult for that brain to unlearn that habitual behavior.

BALER: the recovery pathway is really not to unlearn that behavior, because just like learning how to ride your bike, it cannot be done. So what you have to move through the recovery pathway of an addicted individual is trying to cover those learning pathways of addiction with newer ones with coping skills with new learning mechanisms, new habits, that allow you to kind of put those learning mechanisms in the background, you try to avoid bikes, try to avoid a bike trails and anything that's associated with the biking thing with the drugs. So as not to recall those behaviors, try to put in the back your history, and cover those drugs with new learn new coping skills, new healthy behavior styles that allow you to over time, those addicted behavioral pathways of learning will recede back and back further back into your memory and your history. And eventually, they will almost disappear, never totally disappear. Because he's just like learning how to ride a bike. It will always be there.

VUE: Baler shared two tips for preventing substance use.

BALER: One is sleep. I think it's extremely important, something that is overlooked, the importance of a good night's sleep, eight, nine, 10 hours of sleep depending on your age, particularly when you're an adolescent. So that's basic, there is no healthy brain if you don't sleep.

BALER: Number two, is to learn about the brain and the brain development. And what happens during those 12-13 years between the pre adolescence nine, 10 years of age, and you are 19, 20 years of age, during that period of time, the brain is going through a very complex, very sophisticated process of development. So if we could push the onset of any substance use beyond the years of development, we would dramatically lower the risk of addiction of substance use disorders.

VUE: He said that there are two processes during the years that your brain is developing, both of which are sensitive to the toxic influence of substances. First, you're optimizing connectivity of the brain, and second, you're increasing efficiency in which information is sent back and forth between different parts of the brain. Using drugs or alcohol at a later age allows the brain to go through these processes and decreases the risk of addiction.

VUE: Erika Statzel recommends finding activities where you won't be around substances.

STATZEL: There's always other ways and other things to do as friends and have fun without involving substances. Like bowling, as long as you know you're in your same friend group and wearing masks. And then working out at the gym or just walking outside. There's other activities to do to help with anxiety and depression. Getting those endorphins going.

QUEZADA: As we deal with the consequences of a school year unlike any other, mindfulness of our relationships with stress and substance are more important than ever before. Check up on your friends and family, take some time to reflect on your mental health, and never be afraid to take the steps you need to take care of yourself.

FADE UP & UNDER OUTRO MUSIC

MEGAN PALMER: In other U news: George Floyd Square at the intersection of 38th and Chicago will remain a place of remembrance throughout the winter; the Community-University Health Care Center in the Phillips neighborhood continues to adapt to patient needs during the pandemic; and the NCAA has announced that March Madness games will all be played at the same site. We'll see you next week.