



National Center on  
Substance Abuse  
and Child Welfare

# **STRONGER THAN YOU KNOW:**

## **Tools for Navigating Life's Challenges**



**A resource guide for adolescents and young adults affected by substance use, mental health disorders, and child welfare involvement**



Drugs. Alcohol. Mental health. These are very important (and often very confusing) topics to consider as you're growing up. So just how do you make smart choices? How do you know where to turn?

This guide offers answers to some key questions:

- How does your brain develop?
- How do alcohol and drugs really affect you?
- What are the keys to positive mental health?

We'll discuss ways to increase positive things in your life—like strong relationships and healthy habits—things that build resilience and support your well-being. The overall

goal is to learn where to find helpful tools and resources as you get set for a safe, healthy, and positive future.

Adolescence and young adulthood can be especially challenging when you're dealing with parental substance use or child welfare involvement. Check out the "You're Not Alone" stories below. They highlight shared experiences and recurring themes from people your age who participated in our national conference. These teens spoke about **navigating foster care, experience with parental substance use, and managing their own challenges**—offering insights that reflect the realities of what you might be facing right now. Let's get started!

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## BRAIN POWER: THERE'S A LOT GOING ON UP THERE

*Adolescence is a crucial time for brain development. Here's a list of resources that explain what's happening in your brain when using substances, as well as materials about mental health.*

- [Your Brain: 6 Facts You May Not Know](#) was written by a group called We Think Twice, and it explains how the teenage brain develops, facts about brain growth, emotions, stress, and learning. You'll find tips on managing emotions and building healthy habits.
- [Speaking of Psychology: Understanding the Teenage Brain](#), an American Psychological Association podcast, explains why teen brains thrive on opportunity, growth, and yes...risk.



## DID YOU KNOW?

**Addiction** messes with your brain. When someone keeps using a drug over and over, it changes how their brain works—especially the parts that deal with feeling good and making smart choices. That's why people can end up using a drug even when it's clearly hurting their life—they're not just choosing it; their brain is kind of stuck in a loop.

## ✔ JUST THE FACTS

### What is Confidentiality?

Confidentiality means keeping your personal information safe and private (not sharing it with people who shouldn't access it). Personal information includes things like your address and medical details. Each professional you talk to will explain these rules at the start, so you know what's kept private and what isn't.

### Are there times when confidentiality can't be kept?

Yes. There are times when an adult (such as a teacher, counselor, or doctor) must share information to keep people safe. These include:

- If you say you plan to hurt yourself.
- If you say you plan to hurt someone else.
- If someone is hurting you or someone else.



## SUBSTANCE USE: THE KEY QUESTIONS

### *Understanding addiction, its effect on the brain, and information on specific drugs*

When you talk to a professional about substance use or mental health, your information is generally confidential, meaning they cannot share what you say with anyone else; this is to help you feel safe and open up to get the help you need.

- [What is addiction?](#) a video produced by the National Institute on Drug Abuse examines the brain's "reward" system, explains how brain development influences behavior, and explores how advances in addiction science are improving treatment and prevention of substance use disorders.
- [Can addiction be treated successfully?](#) written by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, it covers evidence-based treatment approaches, the recovery process, and how ongoing research continues to improve outcomes for individuals with addiction.
- [Learn About Substances](#) is a publication from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration and reviews the effects and risks of alcohol, marijuana, CBD, opioids, stimulants, tobacco, e-cigarettes, and vaping.
- [Understanding Drug Use and Addiction](#), developed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, answers the most asked questions: What is drug addiction?, What happens to the brain when a person takes drugs?, Why do some people wind up addicted while others don't?
- [Why Do Teens Use Drugs?](#) Developed by the Drug Enforcement Administration considers risk factors associated with developing a substance use disorder (SUD).



## DID YOU KNOW?

While certain factors make substance use disorders more likely to occur in some people than others, anyone can develop one.

## ✔ JUST THE FACTS

- [Alcohol](#) is a depressant that slows the central nervous system and impairs reaction time, muscle coordination, and sensory perception.
- [Cannabis](#) affects areas of the brain responsible for emotions, memory, and judgment. Heavy use causes problems with thinking, memory, and learning.
- [Opioids](#) bind to brain receptors that process pain and trigger a surge of dopamine, creating feelings of relaxation and euphoria. Prescription opioids can cause many side effects, like feeling sleepy, feeling sick to your stomach, and slow or stopped breathing—which can be deadly.
- [Fentanyl](#) is a powerful synthetic opioid that is often illegally made and can cause fatal overdoses, even in small amounts. It's highly addictive and can be hidden in other drugs, making test strips a useful tool for reducing risk.
- [Methamphetamine](#) is a highly addictive synthetic stimulant that can cause intense euphoria and energy, but also serious health risks like paranoia, heart problems, and even death. Its use—especially when combined with fentanyl—contributes significantly to the overdose crisis in the U.S.



## MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

### *Understanding mental health and finding support*

- The [Jed Foundation](#) has resources to help navigate feelings and situations (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, stress). Their publication "[How to Get Help](#)" covers *7 Ways to Get Affordable Mental Health Care, What to Expect From Therapy, and What Is Therapy...and Will It Work?*
- [Navigating a Mental Health Crisis: A NAMI Resource Guide for Those Experiencing a Mental Health Emergency](#), developed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, contains essential information for individuals and families in mental health crises. It explains causes and warning signs, de-escalation strategies, available resources, and tips for advocating for safety, rights, and the ability to make your own decisions during a crisis.

- [Entering Adulthood: Getting Help for Mental and Substance Use Disorders](#), an infographic by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, offers relevant data and common signs about mental health and substance use challenges.
- [Getting Answers to Your Mental Health Questions](#), prepared by We Think Twice, helps teens talk with a trusted adult and get vital information about mental health.
- [Mental Health Facts](#) website by We Think Twice shares key facts about youth mental health, encourages open conversations, and offers guidance on seeking support. It empowers teens to prioritize self-care, understand common challenges, and connect with trusted adults for help.

## DID YOU KNOW?

**1 out of 5 young people experience a mental health disorder each year.** Mental health conditions are common. You are not alone. **Help is available.**



## NAVIGATING YOUR PARENT'S SUBSTANCE USE

*Support, understanding, and hope when you are affected by your parents' substance use*

- [Al-Anon](#) and [Alateen](#) are organizations for people affected by another person's substance use.
- [Just 4 Teens](#) by the National Association for Children of Addiction offers resources, events, FAQs, and more for teens and young adults who have parents with substance use disorders.
- [Understanding the Seven Cs](#) a key resource developed by the National Association for Children of Addiction helps young people affected by parental substance use. Topics include: 1) learning to accept what you can't change, 2) understanding that "you're still okay", and 3) building healthy coping skills for a stronger, more resilient future.

### YOU'RE NOT ALONE: FEELING UNHEARD

"I kept telling them my dad was using, but no one listened. Then after I was removed, they made me visit him—even when I could tell he was under the influence."



## JUST THE FACTS

Recognizing signs of drug use in a family member can be challenging. [Warning signs](#) may include:

- **School or work problems:** skipping, poor performance, or loss of interest
- **Physical changes:** red eyes, weight changes, low energy
- **Neglected appearance:** lack of grooming or care for clothing
- **Behavior shifts:** secrecy, isolation, or sudden changes in relationships
- **Money issues:** unexplained need for cash, missing money or valuables

## DID YOU KNOW?



In [2023](#), about 1 in 4 kids in the U.S.—that’s **nearly 19 million**—lived with a parent who had a substance use disorder. Over 7.5 million had a parent with a more serious SUD, about 3.5 million had a parent dealing with more than one addiction, and more than 6 million had a parent challenged by both addiction and mental health issues like depression.



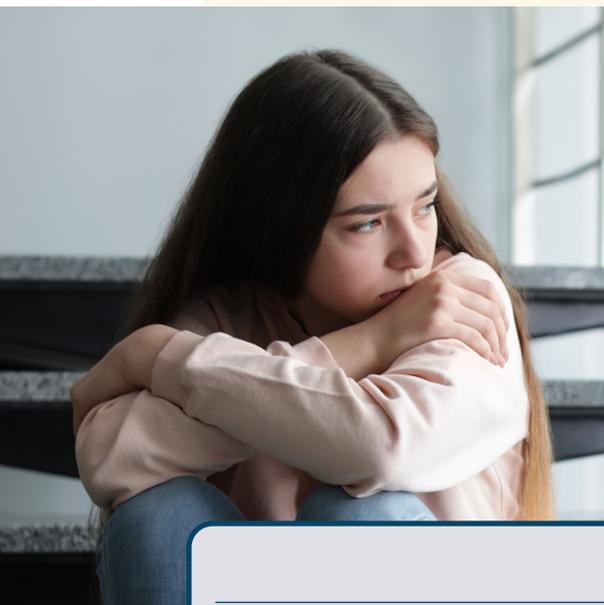
## WHEN LIFE GETS COMPLICATED: PROTECTIVE AND RISK FACTORS

*Understand how early experiences shape your future—and how to build resilience*

- [About Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#) developed by the Centers for Disease Control explains ACEs—potentially traumatic events in childhood such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction—and how they can negatively affect long-term health, well-being, and life opportunities. It also highlights the importance of prevention and the broader social factors that influence who is most at risk.
- [Risk and Protective Factors](#), also by the Centers for Disease Control, outlines the various individual, family, community, and societal factors that can increase or reduce the likelihood of adverse childhood experiences. It emphasizes the importance of understanding these influences to prevent ACEs and promote safe, stable, and nurturing environments for teens.
- The [Toxic Stress](#) webpage and [A Guide to Toxic Stress](#) by the Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, examine how toxic stress—caused by prolonged or intense activation of the body’s stress response—affects early childhood development, and how you can help yourself cope.
- The [Four Building Blocks of Hope](#), prepared by Tufts Medical Center, reviews some of the key positive childhood experiences (PCEs) that help children grow into healthy, resilient adults.

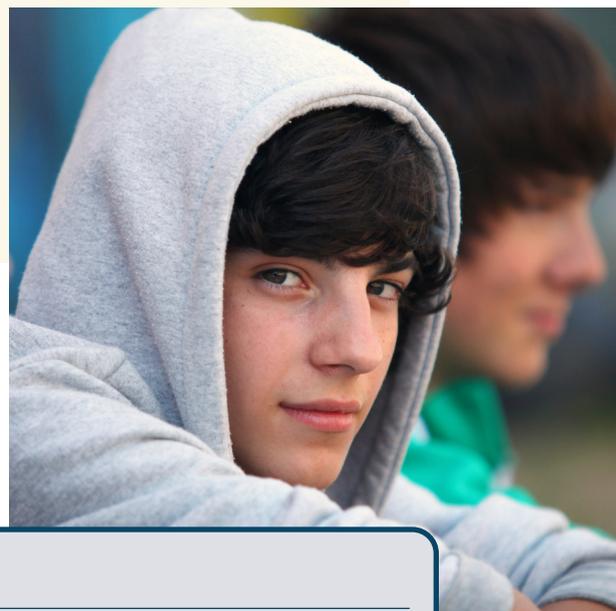
## YOU'RE NOT ALONE: FEELINGS OF CONFUSION AND HURT

"I didn't understand what was really going on with my mom's drug use until after I left. I thought it was her boyfriend, but later I realized the signs pointed to her—and that hurt."



## YOU'RE NOT ALONE: LOSS OF INNOCENCE

"I knew everything about my mom's drug dealing—even helped hide it when the apartment got raided. I was just a kid, but I was pulled into all of it."



### THE SEVEN Cs

I didn't **CAUSE** it. I can't **CONTROL** it. I can't **CURE** it.  
I can help take **CARE** of myself by **COMMUNICATING** my feelings,  
making healthy **CHOICES**, and **CELEBRATING** me.

## DID YOU KNOW?



**Protective factors** are strengths or conditions in individuals, families, communities, and society that reduce risks and support the healthy development of children, youth, and families.



## DID YOU KNOW?



**Positive childhood experiences** are powerful, protective factors that support brain healing from trauma and foster strong mental health throughout adulthood.

## ✔ JUST THE FACTS

The *Youth Thrive Framework*, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, focuses on helping older children, teens, and young adults—especially those involved in child welfare or juvenile justice systems—build strong foundations for success. It highlights ***five key protective and promotive factors***, as described by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, that help youth grow and thrive:

- 1. Youth Resilience:** Helps youth handle stress, bounce back from tough times, and keep moving forward.
- 2. Positive Social Connections:** Encourages strong, healthy relationships with friends and supportive adults in places like school and community programs.
- 3. Understanding Teen Development:** Helps adults and youth learn about how the brain and body change during adolescence, so they can better support each other.
- 4. Support in Tough Times:** Makes sure youth know how to ask for help and get what they need—like food, housing, health care, or legal support.
- 5. Thinking and Emotional Skills:** Builds decision-making, self-control, confidence, and character traits like persistence and integrity.



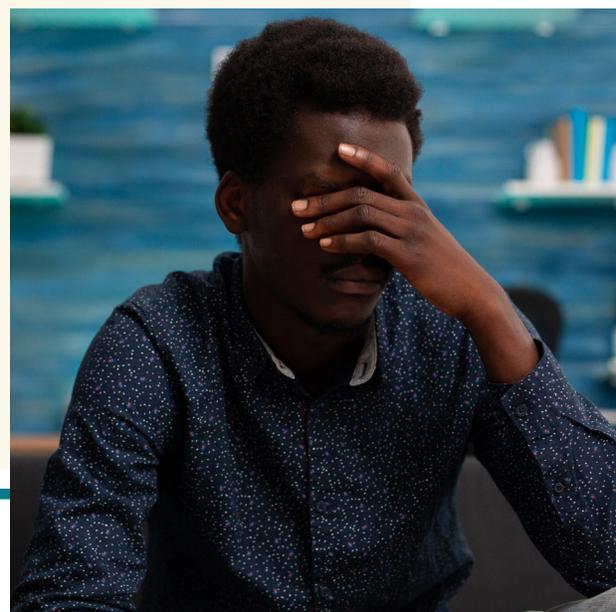
## PREVENTION & PROTECTION: KNOW YOUR OPTIONS

*You deserve safety and support: Explore your options and build a brighter future*

- [In-Home Services to Strengthen Children and Families](#) by the Child Welfare Information Gateway explores available and effective services while children stay with their parents that promote safety and help keep children and families together.
- [Empowering Youth in Court](#), prepared by the Juvenile Law Center, examines effective in-home services used to promote safety and help keep children and families together, as well as practical considerations for their implementation.
- [Keys to Your Financial Future](#) is a program created by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®. It helps young people ages 16 to 26—who are starting to take on adult responsibilities—learn important money skills they need for the future.

## YOU'RE NOT ALONE: CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF PARENTS' CHOICES

"I suffered consequences for things I didn't do—just because of my parents."





## TRANSITIONAL AGE YOUTH: YOUR NEXT CHAPTER

### *Your future, your way: Resources to help you thrive after foster care*

- [Campus Support Programs: Tips for Students Who Have Been in Foster Care](#), by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, examines why campus support programs are important, the types of supports they offer, and how to find them.
- [Keys to Your Financial Future](#) website by the Annie E. Casey Foundation has tips for taking on more financial responsibilities.
- [Independent Living and Transitioning From Foster Care](#), prepared by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, provides resources to learn about programs and services that serve young people transitioning from foster care.
- The [SOUL Family Framework](#), developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, broadens permanency options by fostering a lasting connection with at least one caring adult, ensuring that young people leave foster care with a strong support system.
- [What available supports and resources are in place for youth transitioning from foster care?](#) Published by Children's Bureau, contains services and resources designed to assist those in foster care as they work toward self-sufficiency.



## RECOVERY & RESILIENCE: FINDING YOUR PATH

### *Discover support systems and recovery communities that meet you where you are*

- [Young People in Recovery \(YPR\)](#) offers peer-led support and life-skills programs for young adults challenged with or seeking recovery from substance use. Through local chapters, advocacy, and inclusive recovery pathways, YPR can help build healthy futures and lead change in the community. YPR embraces all pathways to recovery, including 12-step, faith-based, medication-assisted treatment, and others.
- [RecoverMe](#), a campaign by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, helps young adults in recovery find practical, encouraging resources for dealing with substance use and mental health challenges. The campaign aims to show that recovery is possible, reduce stigma, and connect people with tools and support for a healthy future.
- [iFoster](#) is a national nonprofit organization that provides life-changing resources and support to young people living outside of their biological homes (e.g., foster care, kinship care, transitioning to independence). They provide access to technology, job training, education support, and everyday essentials.
- [FosterClub](#) is like a support squad for teens in foster care. It gives you a place to connect with others, learn about your rights, share your story, and even become a leader to help change the system for the better.

### YOU'RE NOT ALONE: LACK OF BOUNDARIES

"It felt more like we were best friends than parent and child—there were no boundaries."



## DID YOU KNOW?



**Resilience** is the ability to adapt positively to challenges, such as trauma or significant stress. It involves learned behaviors, thoughts, and actions that help individuals cope with adversity. Resilience can be strengthened through supportive relationships with caring adults, allowing children, teens, and adults with difficult childhood experiences to thrive.



## HOW TO GET HELP: YOU'RE NOT ALONE

### *Reach out, get help, and take the first step*

- The [Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline](#) is available 24/7 for anyone dealing with or worried about abuse. You can call or text 1-800-422-4453 or chat with real, trained crisis counselors—not bots. Whether you need advice, support, or just someone to talk to in a safe space, they've got your back. They can also help you find other resources if you need more help.
- [I am ME app](#): This free app empowers young people 11–24 to take charge of their mental health and well-being. It helps users: 1) better understand what affects their mental health; and 2) build confidence, purpose, and a personal definition of success. Features include relevant articles; self-help tools; mood and stress trackers; personal development tips; specialist resources; as well as inspiring audio, video, and messages.
- [Maternal Mental Health Line](#): Text or call 1-833-852-6262 for support through all stages of pregnancy, with free, confidential access to professional counselors, real-time information, and support group referrals. Counselors provide support in English and Spanish.
- [Mental Health and Substance Use National Helpline](#): Call 1-800-487-4889 (in English and Spanish) for free confidential treatment referral and information on mental health and substance use disorders.
- [Find Support](#) webpage also by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration offers resources to varying types of support groups for mental health, substance use, and other recovery support services.

**No matter what challenges you're facing or what questions you have, the information and resources shared in this guide can be a crucial next step in getting the help and support you need.**



## DID YOU KNOW?

Talking to people who've been through similar situations can really help. They get it, and since they're working on healing too, they can be a great **support system**.

## CONTACT US

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