

# **The Top 12 Teen Addictions**

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- 1. Junk Food**
- 2. Internet/Computer Use**
- 3. Marijuana and/or Hash**
- 4. Alcohol**
- 5. Tobacco**
- 6. Sugar/Candy**
- 7. Over-Eating**
- 8. Under-Eating or Anorexia**
- 9. Self-Harm**  
**(primarily cutting or wrist slashing)**
- 10.S-e-x**
- 11.Bullying or abusing others**
- 12.Video Games**

### **How do I know this? Because I asked.**

I've spoken to thousands of students across the U.S. and Canada about addictions. After doing general assemblies, I then gave workshops for those who were suffering from compulsive and addictive behaviours. Each child participant was asked this question: "What habits(s) do you most want to stop or reduce in your life right now?" The answers were startling.

From a sampling of 17 of the schools I visited, 265 students (Grades 7 to 12) voluntarily attended my Healthy Habits workshop and 28-day programs. On forms filled out anonymously, they listed 92 different destructive habits with which they were struggling, for a total of 1031 times! This means that each child had an average of four habits from which they wanted FREEDOM.

The 12 most common addictive habits are listed above. The other 80 are equally shocking and can be found below.

### **Who Are These Kids and Where Do They Come From?**

1031 bad habits and addictions for 265 kids seems incredible. But it's true. Yet there was nothing unusual about the type of schools or communities these kids came from. Ten schools were Public/Secular, 5 were Catholic, 1 was Alternative/At-Risk and 1 was First Nations. The communities they lived in ranged from low-to-high on the economic scale.

These weren't your typical "at-risk" students, referred by school officials, guidance counselors or parents. They first attended my General School Assembly talks I gave on addictions, and then chose to come forward to receive help. They recognized these habits and compulsions as being detrimental to their lives and health, and came because they'd been unable to deal with them on their own. And for school staff, it was an eye opener. Many had been unaware of how many students were suffering in silence, and were stunned to hear of the multitude of addictive behaviors.

The students who came forward did so despite being warned of the strenuous commitment required in the workshop, and the 28-day Healthy Habits program that followed. They understood that their success would be contingent on partnering with an "Accountability Buddy," as well as weekly sharing in a community of kids with similar problems.

### **How do we reach these Kids?**

In many schools, these kids are the ones we've given up on -- the underachievers, the troublemakers, the bullies, loners, smokers, drinkers and "druggies." We treat them like they are bad and wrong, a problem we'd rather be rid of -- which gives them even more evidence that the negative self-image they've already created for themselves (in response to significant events that happened in their past) IS TRUE.

For me, it started in grade two. We were asked to go to the front of the room and talk about our parents. As I heard other kids talk about their Moms and Dads, I compared myself to them. I reflected that my Dad didn't live with us, and he never came to visit. My Mom was a receptionist who never finished high school, and we lived in a government-subsidized apartment building.

From this simple experience, I made up the false belief that I was inferior to other people, a loser, broken and inadequate. It wasn't "the truth" -- but it became "my truth" because I made it so. And as Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "We shape our lives and we shape ourselves. Ultimately, the choices we make are our own responsibility."

In an attempt to compensate for the unconscious choice I had made to be inferior, I became addicted to being superior to other people. I studied obsessively like a workaholic to get better grades than other kids. I played sports only to win because, if I won, others would lose and that would make me feel superior. I chose friends who were younger or weaker than me so I could bully them around. But this way of living life was unsatisfying and took too much work, so I eventually got high, engaged in a multitude of other destructive habits, and even thought of suicide as a quick and easy way to escape.

As a speaker now, I am fully aware that trying to scare students out of experimenting with dangerous or illegal activities is not the most effective approach. In fact, one of my partners, Dr. Gabor Maté, says this in his latest book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*:

"When it comes to drug education, most governments appear to view prevention largely as a matter of informing people, especially young people, that drugs are bad for them. A worthy objective, certainly, but like all behavioural programs, this form of prevention is highly unlikely to make a significant impact. The reason is that the children who are at greatest risk are the least open to hearing the message..."

Children who have been abused...or are for any other reason alienated from adults, do not look to grown-ups for advice, modeling or information. And yet...these are the children most prone to substance use. We have witnessed the same problem with attempts to prevent or eliminate bullying: the dynamics of bullying or victim-hood are rooted deep in a wounded child's psyche. This is why moral preaching and plethora of anti-bullying programs have little or no impact... Programs aimed at changing or preventing behaviours always fail if they do not address the psychological dynamics that drive the behaviours in question."

That's why I use my personal story of addiction in a different way -- as a way of connecting my own challenges, pain and choices with theirs, so as to inspire those in severe pain to attend my healthy habits workshop and 28-day program.

What I've discovered is that kids relate to this. Yes, many are alienated or angry. Those with serious behaviours and addictions are afraid, and they're desperate for a way out. But when someone is honest and direct with them, and has practical answers to the problems they're facing, they are ready to listen.

Dr. Maté also says this: "If schools...are to engage in drug education with a view to prevention, they need first to create an emotionally supportive relationship between teachers and students in which the latter feel understood, accepted and respected. Only in such an atmosphere...will young people develop enough trust to turn to adults with their problems and concerns...Only healthy, nurturing relationships with adults will prevent kids from becoming lost in their peer world -- a loss of orientation that leads rapidly to drug use." For those many young people who may, in reality, never have such nurturing relationships with adults, one of my intentions is to give them a new and empowering way of looking at the world and their lives.

## **How Much "Choice" Do We Really Have?**

The world taught me to see myself as a victim at an early age. That belief gripped me during my years of being addicted -- and is one I still hang onto at times today. Yet my own sustained recovery (since Nov. 4th, 1999) has depended on changing this belief about who I am, and my interpretation or "story" of what happened "to me" earlier in my life.

What I've recognized and teach kids in my workshops is that being a victim is a choice. Yes, we may have been "victimized" and experienced bad things in our lives. But how we look at those events now is up to us.

Many of us have heard about the movie and book, *The Secret*. It is based on the concept that we create and are "the cause" of everything in our life. Some argue that this idea is too extreme, but whether it is the "whole truth" is not the point. What IS important is whether our current view of life is empowering. "While pointing the blame at others (playing the victim) may feel better than assuming responsibility for unwanted conditions, there is a very big negative repercussion to believing that something outside of you is the reason for your own lack of success: When you give the credit or the blame to another for your success or lack of it -- you are powerless to make any change." Esther and Jerry Hicks, Authors of *The Law of Attraction*.

As an addict who saw himself as a total victim (and I had the experiences to prove it), the idea of being "cause in the matter of my life" didn't really seem to apply to me. However this began to change as I investigated the works of people like Stephen Covey (author of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*), Richard Bandler (founder of Neuro Linguistic Programming), Tony Robbins, Wayne Dwyer, Bob Proctor, Neale Donald Walsch (the *Conversations with God* series) and many others, and took courses from companies like Landmark Education. Their insights helped me see the full extent to which I was playing the victim, and how I was letting my dis-empowering interpretations of what had happened to me in the past destroy my future.

## **Applying this in our Schools**

As a teenager, my choices led me to become and stay addicted. By transforming what was behind my addictions (which, for me, did include working a 12 step program) and becoming responsible for the decisions I had made, I am now able to live free of not just one addiction -- but numerous addictions, rather than as a victim of my past.

What I want students to know is that they have this same choice. My workshops help kids shift their attention and energy away from the seemingly hopeless nature of their "bad habits," and redirect it towards developing healthy habits. We focus on their power to choose, to support others, and be supported by a community and buddy system, while reducing their bad habits until they get to abstinence (if that is what they choose).

I believe this message encourages and enables young people to make far more change than any threats or negative statistics could ever do. And the results are proving very positive. For more on this, see the case studies and testimonies.

### **What Kids are Dealing With: The Full List**

As promised earlier, here is the full list of habits, addictions and behaviours (and the number of times each was reported) as listed by 265 of the students who took part in my workshop and 28-day Healthy Habits program. Of these students, 182 were females, 76 were male and 7 did not specify.

- 1. Junk Food - 109**
- 2. Internet/Computer - 103**
- 3. Marijuana and/or Hash - 92**
- 4. Alcohol - 89**
- 5. Tobacco - 85**
- 6. Sugar or Candy - 79**
- 7. Over eating - 69**
- 8. Under eating or Anorexia - 69**
- 9. Self-harm - 48**
- 10. S-e-x - 41**
- 11. Bullying or abusing others - 38**
- 12. Video games - 38**
- 13. Lying - 29**
- 14. Stealing - 17**
- 15. Ecstasy (psychedelic drug) - 16**
- 16. Nail biting - 14**
- 17. Cocaine - 12**
- 18. Laziness or lack of motivation - 12**
- 19. Gambling - 11**
- 20. Over spending/shopping - 9**
- 21. Magic mushrooms - 8**
- 22. Bulimia or purging - 6**
- 23. Depression - 6**
- 24. LSD - 6**
- 25. Anger - 5**
- 26. Involvement in abusive relationships - 5**
- 27. Over sleeping - 5**
- 28. Telephone usage - 5**
- 29. Movies and television - 5**
- 30. Bad attitude - 4**
- 31. Being a victim or blaming others - 4**
- 32. Caffeine - 4**
- 33. Energy drinks - 4**

34. "Oxy Cottin" - 4
35. "Special K" - 4
36. Cursing - 3
37. Fighting with parents - 3
38. Over exercising - 3
39. Co-dependence or people pleasing - 3
40. P-o-r-n-ography - 3
41. Text messaging - 3
42. Pain killers - 3
43. 2-CB (psychedelic drug) - 2
44. Isolation or being alone - 2
45. Rudeness - 2
46. Complaining - 2
47. Diet pills - 2
48. DMT (psychedelic drug) - 2
49. Gossiping - 2
50. Masturbation - 2
51. Morphine - 2
52. Opiates - 2
53. Overworking - 2
54. Percodan - 2
55. Pyromania - 2
56. Salvia (psychoactive drug) - 2
57. Stress - 2
58. Worrying - 2
59. Being abused - 1
60. Arguing - 1
61. Gang membership - 1
62. Tardiness - 1
63. Lip biting - 1
64. Self-blame - 1
65. Burning self - 1
66. Chocolate - 1
67. Choking - 1
68. Cracking knuckles - 1
79. Choosing bad friends - 1
70. Drinking blood - 1
71. DIPT (psychedelic drug) - 1
72. Fidgeting - 1
73. Fighting - 1
74. Forcing/manipulating others - 1
75. Hair pulling - 1

- 76. Harming animals - 1**
- 77. Holding grudges - 1**
- 78. I like to watch people get hurt - 1**
- 79. Insomnia - 1**
- 80. Making others feel sympathetic - 1**



- 81. Manipulating others - 1**
- 82. Methadone - 1**
- 83. Negative thinking - 1**
- 84. Opposition to authority - 1**
- 85. Overactive - 1**
- 86. Pain - 1**
- 87. Panic Attacks - 1**
- 88. Partying - 1**
- 89. Suicidal thoughts - 1**
- 90. Unspecified illicit drugs - 1**
- 91. Valium - 1**
- 92. Violent behavior - 1**

Only 13 of these behaviors were listed on the original form. The other 79 were written in by students themselves as being problems with which they wanted help. Yet even these numbers do not tell the whole story. For example:

1. In #11 -- Bullying, 38 kids came to the workshop for help with bullying behaviours they were unable to stop. However elsewhere in the survey, 93 kids admitted to bullying others, while 58 students said that being bullied was a problem for them.
2. The number of students who experience addictive and compulsive habits is clearly much higher than those who attended the workshops. Many kids who were known in their school to be "at-risk" or have specific problems did not attend.

### **Final Words**

It took tremendous courage for kids with such behaviors to attend these workshops. But it is also a sign of how much they want help -- and of the potential for change in our schools. Why? Because their choices will affect others. The more we can help them overcome their addictions, the more other students will see their success and come forward for solutions to their own problems. And this in turn will grow?

I believe it is up to us, as adults, to teach kids to take responsibility for the choices that affect their lives, and to offer them practical steps that will give them positive results. And the best way to teach that is to do it for ourselves. As Gandhi said, "be the change you want to see in the world."