

Understanding and Addressing Stigma Around Substance Use - Tips for Educators by Youth

Tool

Resource: Vaping Education Resources

Grade(s): 4 5 6 7 8

Division(s): Junior Intermediate

Challenge Assumptions

- Stigma is experienced in many ways: through media, microaggressions, self-stigma, assumptions of family, school, and peers.
- Examine how words, phrases, and images reinforce these assumptions and address them. Ask: From where did these assumptions arise?

Avoid Absolutes

- Focusing only on how to say “no” leads to stigma. What about the person who says “yes”? It implies that they are a lesser person.
- Don’t position substance use as an all-or-nothing choice.

No One Wants to Be Labeled “Like That”

- Just because some students use substances doesn't mean they are incapable of success; substance use does not equate to being a failure.
- Don't assume a student is “throwing their life away” because they use substances.

Substances Are All Around Us

- Acknowledge the continuum of substance use. Alcohol, caffeine, and sugar are substances too. Recognize the bias of coffee culture and alcohol use, which are highly normalized while other substance use is stigmatized.
- Recognize and examine how many people use substances. Acknowledge the continuum and apply it to other substances too.

Be Aware of Unconscious Bias

- Everyone has biases that impact the way they think and act. Recognize your biases when talking about substance use and help others be more aware of their unconscious biases based on their experiences and messages they hear in the media, home, and community about other people.
- Bias leads to stigma and can be perpetuated unconsciously in many ways.