The Telegraph

A COSTLY HIGH



With teenagers open to the lure of drug abuse, teachers and guardians need to stay informed to spot the warning signs. Brinda Sarkar reports on an awareness meet at a school

ow can adolescents be kept away from drugs? The answer lies not in scare tactics but in sensitive handling - and in equipping those closest to them with the right tools. With this in mind, The Newtown School hosted a workshop on drug awareness - not for students. but for teachers.

"Let's not label any student as 'good' or 'bad'. These are subjective terms," said principal Satabdi Bhattacharjee. "Adolescents are at a vulnerable age. With hormones raging, they're eager to explore. As mentors, our role is to grant them freedom, but also to stay alert for red flags. We wanted our teachers to be empowered with the latest insights from experts to protect our students."

The workshop was jointly organised by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB, Calcutta zone), under the ministry of home affairs, and the Department of Psychiatric Social Work, Institute of Psychiatry-Centre of Excellence in Mental Health. state government, in collaboration with The Newtown School.

S. N. Prasad, inspector at the NCB, said drug abuse was a threat especially among students of Classes XI, XII and college-goers. And he appreciated the teachers' baseline

Stav ahead

At first, the teachers were embarrassed to even name any drugs they were aware but then opened up. Prasad discussed with them marijuana, heroin (brown sugar), LSD, methamphetamine (yaba tablets), Ecstasy.... "The fact is students already know all this, so teachers must stay ahead of them," Prasad

He warned that while cannabis products like ganja and charas emit distinct smell, costlier drugs like cocaine, LSD, or yaba tablets are arder to detect. "LSD looks like a tamp, often brightly coloured, and, are to be placed in the mouth. Yaba tablets resemble candy. These can be carried in a pocket or bag without raising suspicion so teachers must



NEGATIVE INFLUENCE: Films like Kabir Singh show influential stars abusing alcohol and drugs

know what they are up against," he said, sharing pictures of the contraband items.

When asked how LSD is nowa-days sourced leaving no digital footprint, teachers offered vague answers like "dark web" or "Telegram". Prasad said teenagers would be able to answer this without batting an eye. "The answer is VPN. A teenager could be sitting in New Town but using a VPN to make his IP address appear to be in the US. There would be no way tracking him down to New Town and the package would reach him safely," he warned.

He urged teachers to spread awareness not just about the health impact of drugs but also about the punishments under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances

Debapriya Bhowmik and Supriva Dev from the Institute of Psychiatry then took over to discuss the psychological and social aspects of

Bhowmik explained the meaning of drug use and abuse. "In the case of alcohol, many start with social drinking at parties. Then weekend drinking becomes a habit, then a daily need. Eventually, the hody crayes it to function. This is dependence and the quantity is ever-increasing," she said.

Why try drugs

• Peer Pressure: "Many youths do it to feel cool or macho. Some groups will only accept them if they take a drag," Bhowmik said. Dey added FOMO (fear of missing out). "They see a friend posing with a beer mug and getting likes on social media so they try to do the same," he

Availability and exposure: 'If parents drink or smoke openly, children are more likely to try it, said Bhowmik. "It is common for adolescents, out of loneliness and boredom, to try liquor from the bottles in the showcase. When they tell their friends they get are idolised and so do it again. Teachers are also role models and so, even though they have the freedom to drink or smoke, they should do so discreetly."

 Curiosity: Keeping kids isolated in a room while parents and their friends drink only piques their

 Excess pocket money: Bhowmik cited the case of a mother who gave her teenage son nearly Rs 2,000 before he went to visit a friend. The hovs bought alcohol, had an accident, and the son died.

• Relationship issues: "Popu lar films like Kabir Singh and Rockstar glorify heartbreak-induced substance use, sending the wrong message," said Dev.

Drugs commonly used by Indian teens:

 Tobacco – in cigarettes. beedis, gutka, khaini, zarda, and hookahs. "They are cheap and easilv available and often teens steal them from their fathers to try," said **Bhowmik**

• Alcohol– branded as well as home-brewed or illicit variants with dangerously high and unknown alcohol content.

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COVER STORY

Opioids - such as heroin, opium, and codeine-based cough syr-

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• Cannabis - ganja, charas, bhang. "Again, youths manage to source these easily and a huge number of OPD patients with cannabis-induced psychosis," Bhowmik said.

 Sedatives – prescription drugs like alprazolam "These can be prescription pills so parents are advised to hide their prescriptions safely," she

• Inhalants - sniffing glue, petrol, nail polish remover, whitener.

How to handle it

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■ Talk openly: Bring up news reports on drug busts to casually discuss the topic with students. And show interest, not suspicion. "If a youth seems suspicious, take him aside and ask more. Assure confidentiality and maintain it. Your job is to guide them back to the right path. Let them know they can come to you to share anything," says Bhowmik.

Positive role models: "Cite icons like Virat Kohli and Cristiano Ronaldo, and let children know that being clean is cool," she said.

Teacher-parent forums: Encourage joint discussions on drug

Warning signs:

△ Frequent nosebleeds, sudden weight loss or gain, red eyes, slurred

△ Secrecy—hiding items, stealing

Drastic behavioural changes drop in academic performance, mood swings, isolation, aggression.

Hallucinations, memory loss, and inability to focus. "You may catch a student sleeping in class and ask him what date it is. He may not even know what month it is." Bhowmik

Keep them motivated

'Addicts don't recover overnight," said Dev. "If you tell them to quit, they won't quit at once so you must plant the seed and keep them motivated, as relapses are common."

He noted that simply listening is often the best support. "One need not ing, meditation, and positive self-

A costly high



S. N. Prasad of the Narcotics Control Bureau shows pictures of LSD that resembles stamps, at The Newtown School. Picture by Brinda Sarkar

Possession of narcotic drugs (eg opium, morphine, heroin, cannabis) and psychotropic substances (amphetamines, LSD, diazepam, ketamine) even in small quantity for personal use is an offence

Cultivation of narcotic crops like opium, cannabis without permission

To allow your premises to store, sell or consume illegal drugs is an

 Trafficking of drugs in commercial quantity can lead to imprisonment of up to 20 years. Death penalty can be imposed for repeat offenders.

DIAL TO AND FOR HELP

Anonymously call the National Narcotics Helpline 1933 to share information about drug trafficking.

■ Call Telemanas helpline 14416 to speak to counselors about matters such as addiction, depression and stress. This is a government helpline, free and is open 24x7.

be a trained counsellor to just lend a patient ear. Guide them to channel their energy into hobbies, volunteer-

Addiction to advocacy Thirteen years. That's how long

dent, to beat heroin addiction. Today, he runs Sarani Wellness Centre near Santiniketan and helps others on the path to recovery "In the 90s, drug use was ram-

it took Nikhil Maity, a Sector I resi-

SCHOLAR & ADMINISTRATOR PS

EVERY FRIDAY IN NEW TOWN & SALT LAKE

pant. I started with marijuana at 18, since all my friends were doing it. It proved to be a gateway drug for me but now. I find youths straightway doing heroin," he said, recalling one Durga Puja when he had thousands of rupees in his pocket, but sat alone, high, unable to enjoy anything. "The irony is stark- an addict may have everything, yet relish nothing."

Awareness is greater now and the majority of teens are conscious and loop." career-oriented, not to get distracted by drugs. Maity is also an IT professional working with AI, and has taught computer skills to his patients. "We have built our centre's website together."

He also has a message for parents of addicts. "Firstly, don't have them forcibly 'picked up'— this is a traumatic practice banned in many countries and makes the patient averse to the treatment from the start," he said. "Also, don't expect an overnight cure after which your son can return and take exams the same semester. If you rush him out he may relapse. And once back home, don't believe him blindly. Let him earn your trust."

While narcotic addiction is common in the 20-35 age group, alcoholics often seek help much later, after losing everything. "Alcohol is socially acceptable, so alcoholics stay on at home much longer," he said, adding that very few women come to rehab.

"That's because women in rehab is a big taboo but the addiction problem is huge among them, especially in the Sector V and New Town workforce. Many women from small towns join the IT sector there. They cannot handle the freedom that they suddenly get. To fit in, they overdo smoking, drinking, and drugs," Maity said.

Another former user from Sector III said his curiosity stemmed from pop culture. "We saw rockstars using drugs and though I knew it was bad I lacked the foresight to realise they would be so addictive," said Rai Basak (name changed).

He recalled a teenage neighbour slightly older to him, who would borrow money from his mother for movies but was secretly funding a heroin habit. "He soon started stealing too. My friends and I began with marijuana and later experimenting with everything, including prescription drugs that were sold at two wellknown medicine shops in sectors I and III in the late 90s."

Basak guit when he realised the drugs were ruining his health and hampering his studies. "Some friends weren't as lucky. One died of an overdose as a teenager. Another committed suicide. Those who couldn't quit do not keep in touch with us. Despite having brilliant minds, they are unable to work, and are lost in a toxic



Are teenagers open about their habits and practices with family? Write to The Telegraph Salt Lake, 6 Prafulla

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