The Joy Hack

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Editor's note: Keertana Uppala is a junior at West Forsyth High School in Cumming, GA and a youth advocate who is dedicated to substance-use prevention. As the youngest board member of Georgians for Responsible Marijuana Policy and the youngest Georgian to earn the Certified Prevention Apprentice credential, she works to help young people build healthier lives rooted in connection, purpose, and genuine joy.

Joy has never been an emotion that required much explanation. It is one of the few things in life that we so desperately crave, even just in small doses. It is a fundamental yet pure emotion that affects everyday life. Something that we express instinctually, starting with a crooked yet carefree smile as a baby, to uncontrollable giggles as a teen, to a pure wholehearted laugh as an adult. A joyful smile reveals a sense of contentment and warmth, revealing the true beauty and value of that moment.

Scientifically speaking, joy involves activity within the brain's reward system and the release of neurochemicals such as dopamine. Some drugs act as a "joy hack" by triggering surges of dopamine that imitate the pleasurable feeling of joy. However, they cannot recreate what gives genuine joy its meaning: the moment, the experience, and the memories attached to it. With repeated substance use,

the brain develops a tolerance, meaning it no longer responds as strongly to the same dopamine effects. As a result, everyday joys such as those triggered by social connection, hobbies, and passions slowly begin to feel subdued; the brain can no longer register them as strongly.

Becoming de-sensitized to joy can rob you of authenticity — that real, true version of yourself that savors every moment of life. Some people experience something similar to the state of mindlessness, where key moments of life become indistinct, life itself loses its meaning, and each day passes into the next. After a certain point, everything and everyone who used to bring joy into your life begins to grow distant, an infinite void of space between you and them. The empty, endless cycle of dependency begins, and the drugs become a coping mechanism that you use to feel anything approaching pleasure.

And yet, the cycle of substance misuse rarely begins with the substance itself; it often stems from a lack of emotional attention and care or an environment that forces one to search for some sort of relief. In my experience, today's young people, especially teenagers, use drugs for relief from academic pressures, fears of being socially isolated, the constant comparison with their peers, a desire to find their place in the world, and, above all else, a need to feel wanted and welcomed within their own homes. I believe that these are the fundamental substance use risk factors of young people everywhere. Psychological well-being and substance misuse are inextricably intertwined, and loved ones must try to intervene if they begin to see signs of substance misuse. Possible signs of substance misuse include losing interest in activities one was previously passionate about, isolating oneself for extended periods, and showing drastic shifts in character and personality.

Both prevention and intervention require love and support — the true intent to be there, wholly, for a loved one who is susceptible to or already experiencing the toll of addiction. Here are my suggestions for supporting someone with addiction: Start off by expressing your own vulnerability, because this will help you establish the person's trust. Tell them you wholeheartedly accept them, but not always their behavior. Acknowledge the anguish addiction causes and the obstructions that can block their path to recovery, which might include their reluctance to stop using a drug that provides temporary but much-needed relief. Above all, emphasize your presence and support throughout the process, whether as an emotional outlet or, in the context of mutual support, something like an AA

sponsor.

With that being said, self-care and firm boundaries are essential for anyone supporting a loved one with addiction. As the saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup. Your boundaries might include refusing to lie for the person with addiction, refusing to give them money, or refusing to be around them when they are drunk, high, or unsafe. Consistently maintaining the relationship throughout the recovery process and beyond requires establishing an unbreakable bond built on a foundation of trust, integrity, and loyalty, and not pity or the sake of "responsibility."

Self-love may seem trivial, but it's the first step to true joy. I think loving yourself is the highest form of respect, even though society depicts it as vain or selfish. Its true meaning involves falling in love with the little things: yourself, your own company, your life, and the world around you. It takes fortitude to forgive yourself, care for yourself physically and mentally, and treat yourself with the kindness you offer others. No matter the highs or the lows, the one thing in life that is constant is us: that we are our own constant companion for every step of the way, from the beginning till the very end. To withhold that love from yourself is to deny yourself opportunities for joy, confidence, positivity, and growth. When we begin to take care of ourselves, we create an inner space filled with love, respect, and positivity, learning to cultivate joy within ourselves. We carry that joy into the lives of our loved ones and into any room we enter. To all the young people out there, my message is this: you are your own key to happiness, and that is one thing no one can take away from you.

In the status quo, we underrate the value of genuine enjoyment, laughter, and fun. Joy is a natural phenomenon, and we're wired to experience it. Finding one's inner joy isn't just about finding what makes you happy, as happiness is ephemeral. Rather, it is about building a sense of fulfillment and contentment that isn't dependent on circumstances, possessions, or external validation. It lives in life's simple pleasures: the quiet warmth within us and the satisfaction we draw from the lives we lead. Inner joy is deeply rooted within you, and in those people, places, passions, and moments waiting to be found again. Even while you face adversity, it is essential to remember that substances can never replace real, genuine joy. They will forever remain mere "joy-hacks," as the innate sense of joy within us was never meant to be hijacked, but instead cherished and experienced wholly.

— Keertana Uppala