

Your Personal Coach

By
Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I'm concerned about drug abuse. The more I talk to people, the more horror stories I hear about kids using drugs in middle school and sometimes even elementary school. My children are grown but I'd like to know what I can do to keep drugs out of my community.

-- Freida

Dear Frieda,

What a good neighbor you are. You are so right to want to take action in your own community. And even though your own children are grown, the health and well-being of other kids in your community directly affect you and everyone else who lives there.

According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (www.drugabuse.gov, 301-443-1124), the economic cost of drug abuse totals more than \$98 billion a year, and that's just from illicit drugs and doesn't include the costs associated with nicotine and alcohol – our society's widely abused legal drugs. The cost of drug abuse continues to rise at a steady and alarming rate.

At least half of that cost is a result of drug-related crime. Doesn't that affect everyone in a community?

Government bears almost half the economic cost of the drug abuse epidemic. Can you imagine how those dollars could improve our lives if they were available to be spent on education, transportation, health care, research, and the arts?

But analysis of dollars and cents doesn't begin to describe the young lives that are ruined psychologically, physically, and spiritually when drugs become the answer to life's difficulties or as a way to feel a sense of "belongingness" in our increasingly alienated society.

There are some basic human needs – the need to feel loved and part of a tribe, for example – that are not being met for lots of young people. When social capital is low – as it is in many of our American communities – the result is substance abuse, crime, dropouts, unplanned pregnancies, and tons of other social problems.

To ask why a young person would abuse drugs is to ask a very complex question that involves everything from individual psychology to family dynamics to social norms and morals. Sometimes the task of making our communities stronger and better containers for all its members seems overwhelming. But we can begin.

Good things will happen when communities begin a conversation about substance abuse by their kids and teenagers. There will be many points of view about lots of issues, but if we can individually make a commitment to listen with an open heart and mind we can collectively move forward.

It is here, in the living rooms and community centers and public meetings in our own neighborhoods that change begins. My first recommendation is to you is to get involved.

Take a look around your community. Are there resources for neglected or abused children? Are there places for kids and teenagers to congregate that are drug-free, pro-social, empowering, and accessible?

If your community doesn't have these assets, then get together with local officials, neighbors, concerned parents and teachers and begin to brainstorm how you can get something going.

Ask the kids themselves. Plan a meeting where they can tell you what they need from you adults. Listen carefully. They'll tell you a lot about what's going on and what they're missing.

Be creative. Did you know that many American cities and towns have looked around, saw despair, crime, and drug abuse and started midnight basketball games at local gyms? Kids gather around eight o'clock in the evening for snacks, workshops and adult company – there's a concept.

They learn ways to stay away from drugs and from 10:00 PM until 2:00 AM – high crime hours – kids are shooting hoops instead of each other and participating in a safe, constructive activity instead of feeling alone with nothing else to do but get high.

Some communities have received federal or state grant money or donations from local businesses to help run these programs.

Midnight basketball came from the heart and mind of the late G. Van Standifer – a concerned citizen just like you, Freida. He made a difference in his community and sparked an idea that has had a positive impact on hundreds of other towns and cities through the National Association of Midnight Basketball Leagues, Inc.

Look up “Midnight Basketball” on an Internet search engine and see the incredible programs that have sprung up in communities much like your own.

When Van Standifer was asked what his idea was about he said, “The last thing in the world that Midnight Basketball is about is basketball.” Instead, he said, it was about giving kids and young adults a chance to escape drugs and despair. People come to play ball or to watch and cheer and to build their lives and to find hope.

Is Midnight Basketball for your community? I don't know the answer to that. I do know that when people care and get together and use their imaginations, we can change the world.

There's an old Hasidic story about a man who went to talk to God because he was ticked off that there was so much suffering in the world. “You can't really love us,” he yelled at God. “If you really loved us, you'd send someone to help.” God just smiled and said, “I do love you and I did send someone to help. I sent you.”

As citizens of our communities and as member of the human race, we all have responsibilities to each other. Good luck, Freida, never forget how much even one person can do to change things. Imagine how the world could be if we all remembered why we were sent.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2006 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com