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Going through the PACES: Stories of Substance Misuse Prevention and Resilience

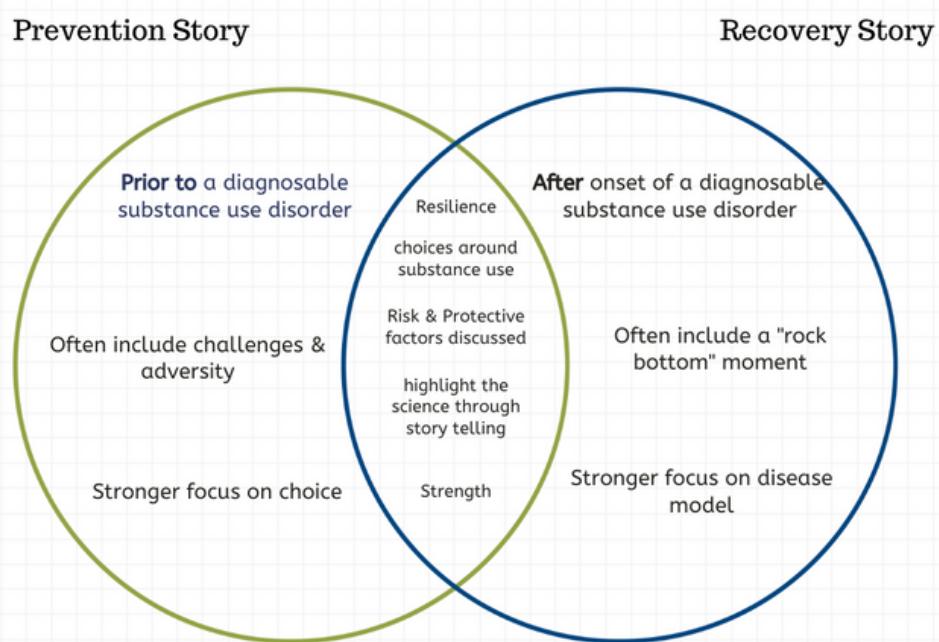


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Introduction

In the substance use disorder recovery and mental health recovery communities, people often tell their stories. This serves to heal the story teller, build community and empathy. These recovery stories are also used outside the recovery community to help build empathy and reduce stigma in populations without the lived experience of Substance Use Disorders. In substance misuse prevention, story telling is not used as commonly or as productively as it is in these recovery communities. However, preventionists often ask people in recovery to tell their story as part of our work so there is something within us that drives us to share stories. With **structure, or support, or follow up**, storytelling in prevention work has shown to be a powerful tool to support larger points.

This product is a collection of stories that shed light on a variety of lived experiences that reflect some level of prevention, whether universal, selected, or indicated. These stories are told by people who made choices around substance use, but who did not develop a substance use disorder. This is one key difference between a recovery story and a prevention story.

The **social-ecological levels**, from the individual to the interpersonal, community to institutions, and public policy are a good way of thinking about how prevention stories can bolster the work of prevention specialists. The stories in this product are organized by which of these levels the stories most clearly reflect. These socioeconomic levels can be helpful in deciding how to best leverage stories to our benefit - the support, structure, and follow that is needed to make story telling effective. To review the socioeconomic model and how it applies to these stories, go on to the next page.

Stories about prevention can be used with structure, support, or followup to support many prevention objectives, including:

- Help young people see that the norm isn't choosing substances, illuminating that possibility for themselves;
- Show the young person struggling with difficult situations that there is a light at the end of this tunnel that you can find safety and comfort in;
- Help people working in prevention understand motivation and how to bolster their programs;
- Help parents understand how family values and talking to their kids can guide them to making choices they would support when their children aren't home;
- Show teachers, coaches, and youth leaders what makes them a safe place for young people to connect;
- Help community organizations understand why their policy around substance use can support choices not to use;
- Help communities understand what supports resilience to substance use;
- Demonstrate how policies, laws, and universal messaging can support individual decision making

The Social-Ecological Model

The Social-Ecological model can help us look at how we can leverage stories from the micro, individual level to the Macro, public policy level to support prevention science and practices. When working with groups who represent one of more of these levels, consider using a story to support your points that touch on one or more of the same levels. For example, if you're working with school staff, consider using a story that talks about a school experience.

The stories within this product are categorized by the levels they most specifically represent. If you chose to gather stories from your own community, consider how those stories might be categorized in this way to determine who the best audience for each story may be.

Public Policy: National, state, and local laws and policies

Community: Design, access, connectedness, spaces

Organizational: Organizations, schools, workplaces

Interpersonal: Family, friends, social networks

Individual: Knowledge, attitudes, skills



Language

The use of affirming language inspires hope.
LANGUAGE MATTERS.
Words have power.

PEOPLE FIRST.

**The PTTC Network uses affirming language to promote the application
of evidence-based and culturally informed practices.**

The New England PTTC believes in using **person first language to reduce stigma**. One goal of telling prevention stories is also to reduce stigma when talking about substance use, substance use disorders, and choices around substance use. Person first language might look like using the term "substance use disorder" rather than the term "addiction," for example. Story tellers included in this product were encouraged to use person first language, but we recognize this is a process and language is always changing. We also recognize authentic language is important to telling a story of lived experience.

CONTENT WARNING: Some subject matter in the stories told may be difficult for people to read or hear, including use of drugs, harmful behavior, domestic violence, and sexual assault. Please consider a content warning when reviewing these stories for use, and give a content warning when reading these stories out to an audience. If you are collecting stories in your own community, feel free to share the below support information along with local resources:

If at any point remembering and writing your story becomes difficult or overwhelming, please know there are resources to support you.

National Suicide Helpline - 800-273-8255

NAMI Mental Health Support Helpline - 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

Sexual Assault Helpline - 1-800-656-4673

How to Use Prevention Stories

These stories are collected using a social justice theatre lens. This means that stories have an authentic voice, and an aim to **make change, raise awareness, or alter perceptions through story telling**. It also means that they are meant to be **read or spoken out loud** by someone other than the person who wrote them. Every person who submitted a story for the use in this project consented to anyone, regardless of their identity, to embody their story by speaking it out loud. It is the responsibility of any person reading these stories to maintain the authenticity of the story by not making changes to the story in order to fit the circumstances of the use of the story. It's important to **preserve the lived experience of people** through the words they told their story in. It is also important to remember that while you haven't lived the same experiences as the person who wrote the story, you may apply the experiences you have lived to lend authenticity to your reading.

We have left our story submission form open, so stories can continue to be submitted to this product, as well. [You can find that submission form on our website.](#)

Through this perspective, these stories can be used in a variety of ways. The ultimate goal of this collection of stories is to support the work of prevention specialists by demonstrating what prevention can look like and be. Ways you might chose to do this are:

- Having students in a **classroom** select and read a story that they identify with in some way and discussing the themes
- Reading a story to an **advisory board** to demonstrate an aspect of prevention, followed by discussion
- Posting to **social media** along with a prevention article to help connect the emotional side of prevention to the data
- Read at **community** health fairs in line with the mission of the health fair or to show how primary prevention goes hand in hand with health promotion
- During video conferencing **meetings or conferences** to help ground participants in the virtual space of learning about prevention science together
- Presenting at a **public health** conference to bolster the following presentation
- **Educating state and local decision makers as to why prevention should be centered in policy changes such as funding decisions for addressing Substance Use Disorders.**

You may want to collect stories from your own community that support these, and other, activities. Stories from your community, school, organization, town, or team may be the most useful to your work, because they highlight the conditions that are most relevant to your work and circumstances.

To learn more about writing stories of prevention and how you might collect these in your community, you can [view our recorded training](#). We have left our story submission form open, so stories can continue to be submitted to this product, as well. [You can find that submission form on our website.](#)

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal

From:
Selena, Maine
She/Her, 59

When I was a junior in high school, my friend drove my boyfriend to my house. He had bloody knuckles and was completely in a panic. He had gone to meet someone, and had taken meth on the way. When he got there, he had become so paranoid and panicked that he thought a tree was a person who wanted to steal from him, and he dove at the tree and tried to fight it. By the time my friend got him to my house, he was completely out of touch with reality and struggled to even get his key into the keyhole of the trunk. I hated the way he was acting, and imagining how awful it must feel for him to be totally out of touch with what was really going on. Later, he laughed about it, and my friends and I laughed about it, too, but none of it felt really funny. I never wanted to feel that out of control.

When I was older, I would go to bars with friends. I would watch them drink so much that they couldn't remember their own names, and they didn't know how they were going to get home. I always tried to make sure they made it home safely, but I knew if I was going to go out, I was either not going to drink, or I would only have one or two drinks all night. I wanted to be in control of myself, and I hated the idea of having to rely on others to get me home - or worse, not make it home. I still feel like those boundaries around alcohol helped me make better decisions in my young adult life and helped me maintain a public appearance that I could be comfortable with. I also got really good at playing pool sober!

From:
Anonymous

I joined soccer in middle school. I remember feeling very clumsy at the sport at first but after attending soccer camp between my 8th and freshmen year my skills improved. I was so grateful to have the opportunity to go to a camp. I had never spent a week away from home and the thought of going to a college campus thrilled me. I was presented with opportunities to learn new skills, make new friends, and spend some time with myself without the pressures of home. On night two, a few college age guys started playing ultimate frisbee outside my dorm, in the lawn area central to the building. I was excited to go play and soon joined. By day three, I was being invited to a party. At that stage of my life, although flattered, I choose not go. I did not want to be around a lot of people using alcohol and choose to go hang with new friends I had made a soccer camp.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal

From:
Holly
She/her

Growing up, my grandmother was a constant support in my life. My grandmother was tough, and I respected her from the time I was a little kid. When I was young, and then when I was a teenager, things were not easy. There were definitely times when I felt like nothing was going right, but no matter how I felt about myself or how bad a situation seemed, my grandmother always believed in me way more than I even believed in myself. I got through highschool ok, but I went a little off the rails in college. I ended up going to a lot of parties, and making some choices I can think better of now. I ended up pregnant with my first daughter before I could finish school and graduate. I thought to myself, "This is it for me. I'll have to drop out and work somewhere I don't want to, but I have to do this to take care of my daughter." It would be me taking care of her alone, and I didn't know what else to do. I was eighteen and it seemed like the only way- I was totally giving up on myself.

But my grandmother hadn't given up. She would call me by my first and middle name, so I knew she was serious, and she told me that no matter how challenging it would be, I had to finish school. I had to chase what I was passionate about, and that even though it would be more work now, my daughter and I would both be happier for it later. Because my grandmother had that faith in me, I powered through and got my degree, and I'm so thankful that I did. Looking back on those days now, I can see how strong I was, and I can see what my grandmother saw in me. Now, I hope to give that same strength to my daughters to carry forward with them in life.

From:
Liz
Maine

It seems like I always feel tired and low energy. I know many drugs and alcohol bring your energy down and make you feel even more low energy, or they bring you down after they wear off. I've seen that happen to people I knew well.

I have a lot of things I love doing in my life and to do those things, I need to keep my energy as high as I can naturally, and I know drinking or smoking pot would wreck that for me. So, I stay away from those so I can keep doing what I love.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal

From: Jessica She/her

As a survivor of incestuous rape and being born into a family with a strong history of addiction and trauma, the odds were stacked against me. I watched many family members struggle with their mental health and choices around substances. I watched them hospitalized from major car crashes or the progression of their disease, being arrested, their bodies lowered into the earth from overdose, spiraling into substances to cope, existing as functional but not happy or healthy. I felt their pain and their struggle. Their experiences and truth became a protective factor for me.

My parents were adult children of people with alcohol use disorder. So even though they didn't actively use, they created an environment and a mindset of living in a household of substance misuse. I learned a lot of ways of being and existing that eventually I was wise enough to unlearn. But their persistent "say no to drugs and alcohol" voices would ring in my ears. Their pride about who I was/would be, their uncanny ability to know when I had made a risky choice, their presence and their repetition with key messages about not drinking or not using drugs was a protective factor for me.

My biggest protective factor was LOVE. Love of myself and others no matter what state they were in or stage of substance use. Being the person they could call, the person that would pick them up and get them home safe. The person that would wipe their tears, listen to their anger, hold their hair, clean up the bodily fluids, and forgive if mean slurs were said. Loving them through acts of kindness and listening; protecting them from harm and sharing ways to make healthier choices. The person strong enough to protect themselves, while protecting others.

From: Anonymous

There are three main reasons I never wanted to use drugs or alcohol:

First, I know very little about my biological family (I was adopted as a baby) so I've got no idea if addiction runs in the family.

Second, I've been taking prescription meds since I was 9yo and diagnosed with ADD (I'm now 21), and I know meds can have bad reactions with other meds and I worry about that greatly. Like I can't stress how worried I get about the possibility of two meds reacting badly with each other. This is the main reason. Heck, in college I learned the main painkiller I took for cramps and pain in general could hurt my stomach lining and essentially bore holes in my stomach. I knew this painkiller was the only one that really even helped me (otc naproxen sodium) in any way, shape, or form and the others did shit to help but I still went to cvs and bought max-strength Tylenol and tried that. After a few days the pain got to be too much and I went back to the regular painkiller. Also, I refuse to be taken down by something as small and fucking dumb as drugs. Prescription or otherwise.

Third, I wouldn't know where to look even if I did want to. I don't, but without knowing where to begin it's a lot easier not to begin at all.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal

From:
Kim M.
Maine
She/her/hers, 38

It was Christmas Day 1988. I work up early to what seemed like a mountain of presents in the living room and was greeted by my mom, sister, and brothers. My dad was at the hospital again visiting my grandfather.

My grandfather had a heart attack a few years earlier and had a pacemaker. When he started having trouble catching his breath, his doctors found the cancer in his lungs. That was a few months earlier. I had just visited him a couple of weeks ago at his home. The ceilings and walls of the small, five room house were always stained with yellow nicotine, just like my parent's house. My grandmother was a proper Christian lady who never smoked, but my grandfather always smoked a pipe. Even at this visit, I can remember seeing his pipe and tobacco on the side table next to his chair in the living room. He had recently come down with shingles on half of his body. His cancer treatments had made him more susceptible to infection. To a five-year-old, his face looked like Scarface from the Batman comic. He and I joked about it as he asked me about school and held me on his lap. It was the last time I saw him.

Three days before Christmas, on top of the failing heart and the lung cancer and the shingles, he came down with pneumonia. It was bad, and he was hospitalized. My dad had been going to see him, but I wasn't allowed. My parents said he was just really tired, but I realized long after the fact that he just didn't want his youngest grandchild to see him in that state. He was so weak and his body was failing. Christmas was his favorite holiday, and earlier that morning - Christmas Day 1988 - my grandfather passed away. My holidays will forever be marked by that same excitement and sadness.

I had grown up in a household where both of my parents smoked. It was the '80s after all and Joe Camel and the Marlboro Man were at their height of popularity. Cigarettes had warning labels and the link to lung cancer was known, but not widely publicized until the mid-1980s. By then, it was too late for people like my grandfather. But, my dad, also a pipe smoker, quit cold turkey after my grandfather's death. My mom continued smoking for several more years. I would hide her cartons. Break the packs. Throw cigarettes away, but there is little an elementary school kid can do for a parent with an addiction. To her credit, she tried all of the techniques - weaning down, cold turkey, patches, and even hypnotism. I was nearly in middle school before she was finally successful. I remember being so proud of her because I had born witness to her addiction and her struggle to quit. I knew at that point I would never smoke.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal

From:
Noel
Maine
She/her

Sometimes meaningful stories start out as harmless, hazy memories. Sometimes the truth of the story only reveals itself through time, age, and experience.

When I came home from elementary school, I played with my little brother. I made him box Mac and cheese for dinner. I gave him his medications. I didn't know what they were, but I knew what my responsibilities were. I knew what to do in an emergency. I knew who to call and what to say, how to administer diazepam gel if he started having a seizure. How to roll him on his side so he didn't choke.

I gave him a bath. I read a few books. I put him to sleep in my mothers bed that they shared. I started towards my room at the end of the hall. I passed my great grandmothers room, her in her bed and my mother in her recliner, both watching the news like many other nights. But tonight, my mother was not her usual cold self. She didn't tell me to go to bed. She was using colored pencils in a fashion clothing coloring book sloppily. My great grandmother was asleep. Mom even invited me in.

This was all wrong. She doesn't smile, she doesn't chatter happily, she definitely doesn't slur her speech because she doesn't drink. She had been complaining about shoulder and back pain forever, but now she wasn't complaining. Now she was stumbling down the hall towards the stairs. She bounced from one wall to the other like a pinball down a slot, but slower. Harder. I begged her not to go down the stairs because she was so unsteady. Her words dripped one into the other, but the words were sweet and disarming. I don't remember the words now, but I know they were wrong. I shouldn't have gone to bed. I should've called 911 like I have before.

The next morning came and with it returned the normal stress, yelling, Red Bull, and pain. It was a relief, even though our normal was not normal at all. Painkillers made my mother happy, but made me fearful. There was no more happiness after that night. There was only more sleep, grogginess, yelling, and resentment. More responsibility. In high school, during my worst times, I would take handfuls of Tylenol and pray for sleep, for reprieve. I chased that drunken high that came from orange and white bottles all over my childhood home.

When my mom turned jaundiced from the damage to her liver, I stopped taking Tylenol. When I got my wisdom teeth removed, I declined "the hard stuff." As I grew and learned about addiction, the memory of my unstable mother—the unsettling sleepy grin on her face, the pill bottles, the hospital trips—became more and more clear. I never wanted my friends and family to see me lost in that haze. I learned other ways to cope with pain, both physical and mental. I saw with clarity that night was the beginning of my prevention story.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal, Community

From: Anonymous

As the youngest in my family, I was exposed to substances most frequently by my siblings. One day, around 12 years old, my sister and I were out with a friend. We stopped at a local store to buy some candy and treats. I realized at the stop my sister and our mutual friend we're stealing items from the store. I paused, payed for my items and waited outside. I was already uncomfortable when a van with a few boys pulled up maybe 16 -18 in age and my sister and our mutual friend said jump in. Already many miles from home, I decided to go with the people I knew and trusted. Inside the van people were putting balloons up to their mouths and breathing in. They offered me one but I declined. I had no idea what was going on but my gut said this is bad, just like back at the store. I remember praying and hoping to make it home safe. My sister and her friend did use the balloons, which I later found out in conversation with my mother was called "huffing". They were also smoking cigarettes. I knew a lot of what was happening was not a healthy choice for me, I was young and more focused on staying safe than falling in with the crowd.

From: Wendi Maine She/Her

Growing up, I never used substances. I didn't want to, my family didn't use them, and all my friends knew I wouldn't say yes if they asked, so no one ever asked me, though I'm sure some of them did once in a while. When I went away to college, I met my now husband. He had high standards around health and wellness, we both played on the school's water polo team. At the time, I was also doing some swim suit modeling and wanted to stay as healthy and fit as possible. Being with my then boyfriend, being active in healthy things I loved, having a family history that didn't include normal substance use, and having ambitions for my future all helped me keep my health at the forefront and not habitually use substances.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal, Community

From:
Beth, Oregon
She/her

When my daughter was 16, she was invited to a Halloween party by a friend from her former middle school with whom she didn't spend a lot of time. She asked permission of my husband and me to attend. My daughter's initial request had very little details, other than the girlfriend's name, date of the party, and location at a local cultural center to which the girlfriend's family belonged. My daughter told me that her girlfriend, also aged 16, had rented the hall for this party and it was going to be a gathering of teen agers with no adults.

As a parent, I feel responsible for knowing who is at gatherings with my daughter, knowing if there are trusted adult chaperones, and understanding what rules and norms will be present regarding risky behaviors, such as alcohol or drug use. Since my daughter's description of the circumstances were so limited, I began to ask her some questions such as, "How can a 16 year old rent a hall by herself without adults? Who else will be at this party? When will the party end and when should I expect her to be home? What kind of activities will take place at the party?". Unfortunately, my daughter's reaction was quite defensive. She appeared offended that I was asking for details. She accused me of not trusting her to make wise decisions about her own well-being and listed off a few trusted friends who had received permission from their parents to attend. My husband and I asked her to get a few more details before we would grant approval for her to go to the party.

About a month later, after not getting very many additional details from my daughter, I had the opportunity to reach out to the parent of one of my daughter's trusted friends who had granted permission for her daughter to attend the party. After a quick conversation, it became clear that although my daughter had given very little details to me and my husband, this parent had the inside scoop! The hall had been rented by the family of party hostess, there would be teens from the old middle school group of kids, as well as new friends, and there would, in fact, be adult chaperones. I followed up with my daughter to let her know that her Dad and I would grant permission to attend, however, she was required to be home by 11:00 p.m. Once again, she was terribly defensive and said she didn't anticipate being home until 2:00 a.m. From our discussion, it was clear that she had no idea there was a local curfew for teenagers, and she had no idea where this group of kids would go once the party ended at 10:30 p.m. We agreed that if she were going to be later than 11:00 p.m., she would need to call home earlier in the evening and tell us where she would be and with whom.

The evening of the party, our daughter called us at 9:30 p.m. to tell us that she and her close girlfriends would be going to a trusted friend's home to play games and stay overnight. My husband and I were pleased that she followed up on her commitment to call us. The next day, when she arrived home, she told us about the great fun she had at the party, the names of the 12 chaperones, the games they played, and the fact that the only place they could go after 10:30 p.m. was a local pie house. This experience gave us all some opportunities to practice open communication and negotiation as our daughter grew into a responsible young adult.

Social-Ecological Themes: Individual, Interpersonal, Organizational

From:
Nikki P.
She/her

I have always been terrified of addiction, I was raised in the ‘D.A.R.E. generation’. In addition to this my estranged paternal grandfather was violent when he drank, which was often, and his exploits in harming his family came before my time but were recounted to me in cautionary tales throughout my life. My father never drank alcohol during my childhood but my mother would occasionally have one single drink, usually a fruity, brightly colored ‘wine-cooler’ which she would offer me a child-sized sip of to taste. A fairly common home remedy for upper respiratory infections in our culture was to offer the child a shot of brandy from the freezer, and the astringent taste and accompanying burn did not make alcohol consumption an enticing prospect. So, I had some healthy, and some not-so-healthy examples of consumption in my formative years.

I have a lot of adult peers now that don’t consume alcohol because of the problems it caused in their childhood but funnily enough as an adult I truly love to have a drink. It is more common than not that I will have a glass of wine or a beer in the evening, or at a meal if I dine out with friends. As a nurse, understanding what risk factors we think we understand that predispose someone to alcoholism, I am forever grateful and astonished that I have never battled addiction in myself, despite possessing many or most of these risk factors. Due to my awareness of these risk factors I always feel like I have a tiger by the tail where it concerns drinking, despite the fact that I haven’t ever come close to relying upon alcohol or having the desire for it dictate the terms of my life.

When you’re plagued with addiction it frequently destroys your life and your relationships, as well as your career. Of course I don’t want that to happen to me because I cherish my life and relationships, but I am also held back from binge drinking over concerns for my health, I know that heavy drinking kills women more quickly.

I also avoid drinking because of immediate safety concerns, not wanting to fall victim to a predator that means me harm and doesn’t value my life. Also as a nurse I care for people with substance use disorder frequently, not only is their health status when they enter my care alarming, but they can be very challenging patients on an interpersonal basis. Patients from all demographics enter my hospital as ‘frequent flyers’, for detox or electrolyte replacement. The first patient that I ever had die in my care, died from hepatorenal syndrome that was irreparable, from a lifetime of heavy drinking. Another one too, he wasn’t old, and he left behind a little girl with no one else in the world to care for her, and I couldn’t help her. Numerous times I’ve been on the phone with bereft mothers, who have young daughters in my care, losing their battle with alcoholism. The pain and desperation in a mother’s voice as she pleads with me to save her daughter, something I am not capable of doing entirely, haunts me. I could never do that to my mother. It bears mentioning I think, that I care for patients addicted to other substances as well, and I notice that opioid addiction for example, is less acceptable to nursing and medical staff than alcohol addiction, for whatever reason.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organizational

From:
Lori M.
Maine

I don't remember anything about him. Not his name. No what he looked like. I only remember how his words sounded in the darkness as I stared into the campfire. Its strange to think that he'll never have any idea how his words that night shaped many moments in the upcoming years when I faced temptation and peer pressure to use substances.

I was a young adolescent at summer camp, enjoying a week of swimming, arts camp; crafts, and archery lessons. Each night, we'd gather around the campfire and sing funny songs, tell stories, compete in silly competitions, or put on plays.

One night, as the ruckus was quieting down and the kids were settling in a circle around the fire, one of the counselors, probably just an older teenager himself, said something like this: A lot of kids think there's no harm when they just try drugs. When you think about it though, you can't ever win when you just try drugs. There are only two outcomes, and they are both bad. If you try a substance and you don't like it, that's a bad outcome because you did something dangerous and you didn't even like it. What was the point? If you try a substance and you DO like it, that is also a bad outcome. If you like it, you will want to do it again. And again. And every time you use substances you are taking a risk of getting into trouble, getting addicted, or even dying. Why would you ever want to just try using drugs when you know the outcome will always be bad?"

The darkness, the flickering flames, and his words resonated with my adolescent self, and stuck with me for all these years, through high school, college, and into adult life. When I think about this young man, I think about the teens and young adults who participate in activities where they serve as mentors to their peers or younger adolescents. Sometimes it may seem like what they say and what they do doesn't make a difference. Sometimes they may feel the sting of a sarcastic comment or discouragement when it seems like nobody is listening. What I want them to know is that somebody IS listening, and lives are impacted. You never know how your actions and words are being absorbed and are giving someone the strength and resolve to make healthy choices. Your impact may be invisible in the short term, but someone hears you and they will be stronger because they don't feel like they are alone in the face of peer pressure. That is the legacy of prevention.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organizational

From: Anonymous

I grew up in a religious family. We went to church several days a week. Although my church friends were my parents idea of ideal, they often made risky choices to escape the pressure of home. I found myself in many scenarios where my friends were experimenting. They seemed like they were having a good time, yet something inside of me said, "no. This is not for me." Eventually, when experimenting elevated I left the safety of the groups I was once comfortable in for the safety of being alone and not being pressured to use. My parents often wondered why I didn't have many friends at the stage of my life, it was easier to be alone than constantly have to say no.

From: Anonymous

In high school our health teacher was very open. We had a small group that wanted to create a health class for seniors, including weight lifting, specific topics, etc. and she customized a course just for the group. We were allowed to be ourselves, be open, ask hard questions, and get answers to questions about substances and our body that most adults were afraid to open up about. She gave us topics and assignments that allowed us to explore our own values, truths, gaps in knowledge and provided opportunities for us to grow as individuals. She was a great teacher and influencer. She positively impacted my decisions not to use alcohol or drugs.

Social-Ecological Theme: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organizational

From:
Kathy O.
California
She/her

Mother's day weekend came and my father, my sister and I drove the 450 mile trip to see our mother. I was 12 years old and my sister was 13. My dad was drunk when he picked us up and we were both scared of the long dark trip on a Friday evening. My dad stopped for more alcohol and as we set out to surprise my mother, we made it within 27 miles of where my mother lived when my dad lost control of the car. We rolled down a large embankment that the police said was about 7 rolls of the car. My sister and I survived the flattened car, while my father flew through the windshield and had severe injuries. He didn't have his seatbelt on. We did. He survived and we did too. But psychologically, this changed my sister and I. How could we forgive this? How do we move on? I swore I would never drive.

In 7th grad Health Class, the teacher taught us about smoking dangers, alcohol and drug use, and it scared me. Everything that would affect me, scared me. It was an opportunity to have a talk with my dad about his alcohol use. And it happened when my dad asked me to get him a beer. I told him how dangerous alcohol was and how addiction works. He responded that he didn't drink and I told him that drinking beer was drinking. He got mad and told me to go to play. I left dumbfounded. I knew I was being lied to and all I wanted was to get this drug out of my house. I told him that I would testify against him at the "trial" since I knew it was wrong. He said that what a horrible child I was to want my dad to be put away. I knew then that I wanted to be around healthy people, or at least people who did not drink.

And then my parents divorced and we moved away. My sister and I were moving to a new state away from family and friends something that threw us into another loop of spirals. In High School there were several mentors that took me under their wings and wanted to see me get to college. Although the road was rough getting to college, there was someone for me at every corner. The community we lived in supported us and helped us through some tough times. I had a lot of support systems that included my teachers, job supervisors and college students (my mom went to college). Between the two of us, my sister became caught in the slide of drugs and I didn't. I worked very hard to stay away from it. But now that I look back on it, I had more support systems than she did. She needed more support than what she received. We both had everything going against us in catching the horrible illness of addiction. She's now trapped. And I'm free. I thank everyone in my life who provided steps to keep me moving to the right choices. Everyone deserves that.

Social-Ecological Themes: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organizational, Public Policy

From:
No name given
Unity, Maine

There were parties in the house growing up. My brother started out playing with a country band...they would practice at the house. The alcohol flowed freely and I experimented with it. People laughing and dancing - they'd always end up puking. The people who came were fun, but then my brother changed to rock, and the people who came changed too. A lot younger people and for a 13 year old geeky girl, I thought I was in heaven. The drugs came into the house. Our parents did not know. I started raiding the medicine cabinet...one of this and one of that. I fantasized about death. I just wanted to be noticed.

My freshman year in high school, a friend opened her hand, it had a pill in it, she said take this. It was THC. I didn't know what THC was. I started getting a pill from her every day. I was stealing from my mom's purse. I started sneaking cigarettes too. I had people high fiving me all the way down the hall. Many to cheer me on. I cried every night coming down. I wanted to be cool. I was hateful to the people who loved me. I just wanted to be alone taking pills. I knew I was flirting with death... I wanted to do things...I wanted to see things. I was so depressed and discouraged with myself.

A real pretty girl, our first names were the same, I heard she died. I never forgot that. She was getting pills from my friend too. I had never seen a dead person. One day, the last day I took a pill, the pill my friend gave me looked different. I broke it in quarters as I usually did and took one. Something was really different, the halls turned up on their sides as I tried to walk. I was crying but no one seemed to care. I was so scared. I just wanted so bad for someone to notice, to ask me if I was o.k. No one did. When I got home I was crying again. I opened up to my mother. She cried too. I promised I would never do it again.

I knew she was going to call the principal. The people supplying the drugs, their parents worked at the school, some of them seemed really nice. I don't think they knew. I talked with my cousin that night. I thought she was pretty and cool. She told me that it was ok not to do drugs, that it was o.k. not to try and follow the other kids. I needed to hear that so bad. I was done with it. I recognized that there were plenty to cheer me on to destruction but few to stand up and encourage me not to get caught up in it.

I speak up. We all need to speak up. We need to open our mouths and speak the truth, no matter who is offended. We need to teach and teach and teach. We need to tell our stories Before it was too late.

Social-Ecological Themes: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organizational

From:
Sarah
Maine, She/hers

"She's a bad influence. She'll be barefoot and pregnant by the time she's fifteen."

-The mother of a childhood friend, when I was 14.

"We want you to go with our select choir to New York City to sing at Carnegie Hall."

- My high school choir teachers, when I was 15.

How can adults look at the same child, around the same time in her life, and see such vastly different outcomes? What does the tightrope look like that this girl is walking to give the impression of failure to one adult and the impression of hope, talent, and hard work to another. The night before I got on the bus with the select choir from my high school to go to new york city, after months of rehearsals and fundraising, one of only two freshmen selected, police had come to my house and escorted my dad off the property in the middle of the night. My parents' marriage had been dissolving for years, and the night my dad came home completely drunk, the tensions came to a boiling point.

He lit a candle in the living room and fell asleep on the couch, asking me if I'd sleep on the recliner chair so he wouldn't be alone. It would be years before I started new cycles of dealing with his Alcohol Use Disorder, like driving him night after night to the nearest VA Hospital, 45 minutes away, for him to check in for detox, only to leave after a work up and check in. Or lining up the cans and bottles I found hidden in the closet with notes asking how he would feel if those had been consumed by me, instead, and listening to him clean them up after returning from the store with more. Or "tough love" of threatening to never talk to him again. Or dumping bottles down the sink, knowing he didn't have money for more and the detox would be brutal.

I was still in the cycle of doing everything exactly perfect- being so perfect and so pleasing that I could be the light to lead him into sobriety. I was fifteen, and only just old enough to see the difficulties my family bounced through from the eyes of an adult, I thought. So, I brought my blankets and pillows and set up my bed in the chair, only to be woken up just before midnight by flashlights and stranger's voices coming through the door to my right, collecting my dad, and blowing out the candle on the TV stand, the wick having burned down most of the way since we fell asleep. In the morning, a protection from abuse order (PFA) had been filed and read, I had showered and applied foundation under my eyes, and with a suitcase of clothes, a concert dress and a string of pearls, I hugged my mom, texted my dad who couldn't be at the school as outlined in the PFA, and boarded the bus for New York, terrified of what might happen while I was away. Terrified that I couldn't fix it if I wasn't there. As if I could fix it if I was there. For me, this is a moment in the life of someone with a prevention story. There were many crossroads in my life where I had paths before me. Times when I had choices to make. Sometimes those choices were impossible to make. Impossible for a three year old. Impossible for a kindergartener. Impossible for a third grader, for an eighth grader, for a freshman, sophomore, junior, senior. And I didn't always make the best choices, or the safest choices.

Social-Ecological Themes: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organizational

Continued, From: Sarah Maine, She/hers

I didn't always learn something from the first time I made a less than wise choice, and I sometimes made the same choices again and again and again in the whirlpool of cycles of substance misuse within a family and thought, again and again and again that it might turn out different this time.

It's been fifteen years since I was the girl who woke up after a night of fighting, candles, brandy, PFAs and sudden life altering change, and got on a bus to perform on one of the most prestigious and beautiful concert halls in the world. It was a nightmare night, and it was something I knew how to handle. I knew how to be the girl who showed up, and hid away the nightmare bits, and performed. It's been fifteen years, but in someways I still feel like the girl on the tightrope.

Between the "barefoot and pregnant," and the first alto on the third riser who worked hard for months to remember the words and adjust her imperfect pitch to the notes. Through nights of fighting and nights you could hear a pin drop. I honor that girl who kept fighting for the really good stuff, even when good stuff was hard to believe in, hard to trust.

And now, closing out the decade and peaking into 30, I see more good stuff everyday. One of the crossroads I stared at over and over was my own choices around alcohol and drug use. I find myself making choices around that more often than you might think, for someone who's never had a drink of alcohol. For me, that's not where the good stuff is. It's in a job where I feel important and valuable as a person, in a circle of friends who think I'm funny and never make me question where I stand with them, in a relationship that feels like solid ground, in a home that I own and get to fill with colors and things and people I love, in my community where I can support others and be supported back, and by the grace of God, still stages where the lights warm your face and the people are good. You can't know how things would be if you had made other choices, those roads are behind you. And I won't blame myself for impossible choices I made. But I do think my choice to lean into the adults I knew who saw my light, and my choice to avoid the substance that called my dad's name, have helped me keep finding good stuff.

There's a lot I don't know. But one thing I do know, beyond a doubt because I lived it, is that you can wake up from a nightmare and pick good stuff, even when it hurts. Even when it feels impossible. That's part of my prevention story

Social-Ecological Themes: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organizational, Public Policy

From:
Scott
Maine, He/His

My prevention story is a story of lived experiences illustrating the power of protective factors. I have been in the field of prevention for over 16 years now, starting as a program coordinator now directing a regional prevention training and technical assistance center. It was a career I basically fell into, but as I've progressed through this career, I've come to realize how the protective factors we talk about in this work, shaped my own life as a person who doesn't use substances. It's a story I've been reflecting upon a lot during the past few months after the unexpected loss of my Mom as she has had a starring role in this story.

I grew up in Washburn, a tiny town of less than 2,000 people up in Aroostook County, Maine. When I was growing up in Washburn, it was a dry town. There was no alcohol sold or promoted at either of the stores in town. There was also no alcohol sales or promotion during community events, such as the annual August Festival that seemingly drew half of Aroostook County. This policy helped set a powerful community norm in Washburn around alcohol that certainly was an influence on me.

As I mentioned, my Mom has a starring role in this story, along with my paternal grandmother, Marie. They were both extremely important role models and supporters encouraging me to live a life focused on achieving my potential and tapping into my creativity. We didn't have any specific, big "say no to drugs" talks in my family. But instilling a focus on personal growth and achievement, for me, meant there was no room in my life for things like alcohol and substances, which would divert me from that path. Additionally, while I did have a couple of uncles who did drink alcohol, my family never had any alcohol present at any of our big family gathering or celebrations. I firmly believe these strong personal and family norms were a foundational influence on living a substance-free life.

The combination of these familial and community factors along with my own individual protective factors, meant I did not engage in any substance use in my adolescence. My first use of alcohol wasn't until I was in college. I'm a living example of how that delayed onset of use can be an important protective factor, as I was able to avoid any progression to regular use, and in fact quickly decided it just wasn't for me and stopped using alcohol altogether. Initially, I would feel somewhat isolated, with a perception that most kids in college were drinking and I was somehow outside the norm. However, I feel strongly that the resilience and independence that my Mom, Dad, and grandparents instilled in me was important, as it was more important to me to be uncompromising to my own personal values around substances.

My story is just one story. But for me it is a powerful reinforcement to take advantage of every opportunity I have in my career to foster policies, practices, and norms to allow as many youth as possible to experience these important protective factors.

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