



# Positive Mental Health Literacy's Effect on Cannabis use for Coping In Teens

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent times, when walking through San Francisco, Seattle, or any major city, you are bound to come across the pungent smell of cannabis. Cannabis contains active chemicals called cannabinoids that, when ignited and inhaled, cause drug-like effects throughout the body. Since cannabis's legalization across 24 states, it has become easier to access and more prevalent than ever. In turn, there has been a stark increase in the percentage of youth cannabis use, and attitudes about its risk and harms. These shifts have caused a problem with youth using cannabis as a coping mechanism. Studies have correlated teen cannabis use with lower academic and behavioral performance. In addition, cannabis is considered a maladaptive coping strategy, which is a coping mechanism that does not address the root cause of the problem, but rather gives a temporary solution. This study investigated whether teaching kids about positive mental health literacy (PMeHL) could help disrupt teen cannabis use for coping.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

A fully observational evaluation research study was performed, as asking students questions on illegal drug use is not appropriate. Evaluation research is a research methodology that is used to determine the effectiveness of a social program or intervention. A literature review was performed looking at studies on whether the intervention strategy, PMeHL, correlated with higher mental health. Along with this, studies on alcohol use and whether PMeHL helped disrupt use were looked at. Studies on alcohol use were looked at due to cannabis being a Schedule 1 drug federally, and alcohol being a good analogue to cannabis. The study ultimately helped evaluate whether PMeHL could be related to higher mental well-being and lower likelihood of using substances like cannabis for coping.

## DATA AND FINDINGS

- **Higher health literacy is linked to negative views on substance use**, including greater awareness of risks and stronger confidence in avoiding substances (Smith, 2024).
- **20% of teens reported unmet mental health needs**, due to barriers like cost, stigma, or lack of knowledge on how to get help (Panchal, 2024).
- **PMeHL is positively associated with better mental well-being**, as shown through scores on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) seen in figure 1 and the Mental Health Promoting Knowledge scale (MHPK-10) (Bjørnsen, 2017).
- **Teen Mental Health First Aid (TMHFA) programs have been proven to increase PMeHL**, helping teens better support themselves and their peers (Hart, 2018).

**Figure 1: The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale used to score a person's mental well being (Bjørnsen, 2017)**

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)					
Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts. Please tick the box that best describes your experience of each over the last 2 weeks					
STATEMENTS	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future					
I've been feeling useful					
I've been feeling relaxed					
I've been feeling interested in other people					
I've had energy to spare					
I've been dealing with problems well					
I've been thinking clearly					
I've been feeling good about myself					
I've been feeling close to other people					
I've been feeling confident					
I've been able to make up my own mind about things					
I've been feeling loved					
I've been interested in new things					
I've been feeling cheerful					

## IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

- **Schools with high cannabis use and mental health issues may benefit the most** from introducing mental health literacy programs if they have the resources.
- **The study's conclusions are tentative** due to limited research on why teens use cannabis to cope and its long-term effects on the brain.
- **Preventing teen cannabis use may require greater awareness of its risks and reduced accessibility** to cannabis for adolescents.
- **Implementing programs like tMHFA could improve teen mental well-being and reduce cannabis use**, but challenges like staffing and standardization make it difficult to implement widely.

## CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

- **Higher PMeHL is linked to better mental well-being**, which can reduce teens' likelihood of using cannabis as a coping mechanism (Bjørnsen, 2017).
- **Teens with higher health literacy show less alcohol use and greater risk awareness**, and since alcohol is used as an analogue for cannabis, the same correlation likely applies to cannabis use (Smith, 2024).
- **20% of teens lack access to needed mental health support**, putting them at greater risk of using substances like cannabis to cope (Panchal, 2024).
- **School-based programs like Teen Mental Health First Aid (tMHFA)** effectively improve PMeHL and mental well-being, offering a practical solution to reduce cannabis use among teens (Hart, 2018).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / REFERENCES

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