

THE SEVEN CHALLENGES

Challenging ourselves to make wise decisions
about alcohol and other drugs



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Overview

Traditional approaches to working with adolescents with drug problems have produced disappointing results. The mad rush to get them to immediately SAY, "I will quit" often leads to either increased defiance, or increased dishonesty, with young people telling adults what they "want to hear." It also leads to failure among certain youth who follow adult directives to quit, but soon relapse because they have not laid a solid foundation for success.

Most young people do not seek drug treatment of their own free will. Most are dragged to counseling by their collars. The Seven Challenges Program starts where youth "are at" (usually resistant and reluctant to change), not where we wish they would be (fully and honestly prepared to quit). We avoid the pitfall of teaching people to be drug free before they have honestly decided to be drug free. We also resist the temptation to follow the common practice of locking horns; trying to convince young people that they have problems, and backing them into defensive positions. Instead of fear and coercion, we harness the enormous power of education, finesse and respectful confrontation. We take the slow but steady approach.

To succeed in working with youth, The Seven Challenges Program places a special emphasis on creating a climate of mutual respect within which individuals can talk openly and honestly about themselves. We engage young people in actively thinking about their alcohol or other drug use, and its effect upon their lives. Working through The Seven Challenges helps them understand what needs they are meeting by using drugs, what harm they are causing, what risks they are taking, and what it entails to give up a drug using lifestyle. We raise consciousness, inspire hope, and motivate internally driven, sincere decisions to change.

Rather than presenting ourselves as antagonists who want to take away drugs from young people, we reposition ourselves as problem-solving partners. We help young people overcome co-occurring problems and learn to meet their needs in positive ways, without drugs, so they are in a position from which they can sincerely make a commitment to change. Once such decisions are made, we teach the tools and provide the support that ensures success.

The Seven Challenges are as follows:

1. We decided to open up and talk honestly about ourselves and about alcohol and other drugs.
2. We looked at what we liked about alcohol and other drugs, and why we were using them.
3. We looked at our use of alcohol or other drugs to see if it has caused harm or could cause harm.
4. We looked at our responsibility and the responsibility of others for our problems.

Overview

5. We thought about where we seemed to be headed, where we wanted to go, and what we wanted to accomplish.
6. We made thoughtful decisions about our lives and about our use of alcohol and other drugs.
7. We followed through on our decisions about our lives and drug use. If we saw problems, we went back to earlier challenges and mastered them.

These challenges, which were developed with the participation of a culturally diverse group of youth, match what we know about adolescent development. Adolescents are charged with forming their own independent identities: Rather than telling them what to do, we need to help them arrive at their own wise decisions.

The Seven Challenges Program is aligned with the important research findings of psychologists Prochaska, Norcross and DiClemente¹ about the stages of change in overcoming addictions. Patient-treatment matching is a high priority. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, the Seven Challenges Program is individualized with *a careful matching of client stage of change and level of involvement with substances to the appropriate intervention*. According to a person's stage of change, The Seven Challenges Program is individualized to help young people: increase their motivation to change; understand what it entails to make a sincere, committed decision to become drug-free and to change from a drug using lifestyle; prepare for successfully making desired changes; and learn and apply relapse prevention skills after sincere, firm decisions to change have been made.

The program is holistic; helping young people understand what new life skills must be learned, attitudes changed, and positive values attained in order to have a fulfilling and healthy life without drugs. Lifestyle action groups are provided for youth who are ready to succeed in making changes, both in their drug habits and lifestyle.

In an independent evaluation conducted by the University of Arizona, The Seven Challenges program was found to result in a statistically significant reduction in drug use, along with gains in ten out of the ten life domains that were tested using the POSIT instrument. Statistical significance was also reached on the reduction of aggressive behavior.

¹Prochaska, J.O., DiClemente, C.C., Norcross, J.C. (1992). In search of how people change. *American Psychologist*, 47, 1102-1114

Introduction

By George D. Comerci, M.D., F.A.A.P.
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Did you ever hear someone say, “Why don’t you grow up? You’re behaving like an adolescent!” You probably haven’t heard it because most of you are adolescents, but I hear it a lot. It kind of says that there’s something wrong or bad about being an adolescent. I don’t believe that and, in fact, if someone told me I was acting like an adolescent, I would be happy and take it as a compliment. Adolescents, as a group, have taken a bad rap in our culture. Adolescents, for the most part, are good people. You are smart, enthusiastic, creative, and, most important, you have faith ... faith that you can accomplish things, that you can make a difference, and that you have the ability and potential to change and grow.

A long time ago (over 35 years!), I started my career as a pediatrician. I really enjoyed being a medical doctor for adolescents and decided to become a specialist for your age group. I have enjoyed taking care of adolescents and have been “turned on” by my patients who have met the challenge of physical and emotional illness; have accepted it, dealt with it, and overcome. Those with fatal diseases, like cancer and heart disease, have been a special inspiration to me.

Alcohol and other drug abuse, and dependency (“addiction”), are in most ways just like physical disorders or diseases. They have symptoms and signs that you can feel and become aware of and that can be seen by others. Also, there are stages of medical conditions as well as drug use that can be diagnosed and treated.

Just like a football or basketball game is divided into time periods such as quarters, physical diseases and drug problems have stages, each one progressing to the next. And just like a game, no matter what stage of an illness you’re in, you always have a chance to start winning. The sooner you make up your mind to win, the better your chances

The Seven Challenges is a new way for adolescents and adults to work together to overcome alcohol and other drug abuse, to grow and develop, and to prepare for the future.

One final point. Just as with a physical disorder or disease, we must pay attention to a person’s family history. So, if one or more of your close relatives had or has a problem with alcohol or drugs, then you must work even harder to meet the “Seven Challenges.” Good luck.

(February, 1995)

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This book was put together by me — an “old guy,” married, with two kids. But the ideas in this book come from young people.

For years, I’ve been talking with young people who were concerned about their use of alcohol and other drugs. To write this book, I focused on those individuals who managed to avoid drug problems, or successfully recovered from them. What they had in common was that they **challenged** themselves to think clearly about their drug use, and how it affected their lives. That’s why this book is called *The Seven Challenges*.

I use the word “we” a lot throughout this book because the ideas are not from me alone. They come from the thoughts and experiences of young people. It is their insight. I only reflect what they had to say.

In this book, no one tells you what to think or how to live your life. No one lectures you. No one tries to control you. No one exaggerates the dangers of drugs. Rather, this book is written to help you think things through **for yourself**. As you know, you have to make your own decisions about alcohol and other drugs. Only **you** can decide how to live your life. But alcohol and other drugs are powerful substances. All people — young and old alike — must think carefully when making their decisions. This book is to help you do that.

If you’re using drugs, it’s because there is something you like about them. Probably you also have some concerns about the potential dangers. This book will help you take a look at the good stuff and the bad stuff. You can see where drugs fit into your life now, and how they may affect your future. If you want to make changes, you can benefit from the wisdom of young people who have already made some of those changes.

This book is divided into seven chapters, one for each challenge. Maybe you’ve thought about your drug use already. If you’re open to thinking some more about it, I believe you’ll find *The Seven Challenges* helpful.

Making decisions about alcohol and other drugs is a big challenge that can’t be avoided in our drug-filled world. I hope this book challenges you to think carefully about drugs, about where you’re headed in life, and where you want to go. I hope you enjoy it and benefit from it.

—Robert Schwebel, Ph.D.

Challenge One: We decided to open up and talk honestly about ourselves and about alcohol and other drugs.

Taking An Honest Look At Ourselves

We pushed people away when they told us we had problems or told us what to do. We pushed them away when they wanted to talk about alcohol and other drugs. We were defensive. Many of us were tired of people talking AT us. We said: “Only I can make the decisions; you can’t make me do anything; it’s my business. If I want to drink or do drugs...I can.”

This is true: It was our decision. But we had to be smart about it.

If we wanted to take care of ourselves, if we wanted to control our own lives, then we had to begin by challenging ourselves to take a close look at what we were doing.

Challenge One: We decided to open up and talk honestly about ourselves and about alcohol and other drugs.

Breaking The Habit Of Lying

Many of us were in the habit of hiding the truth. We were used to being secretive and lying. Many of us had used alcohol and other drugs, sometimes lots of drugs, for long periods of time, without parents (or other adults who took care of us) ever knowing it. If our parents thought we were using drugs, we lied to them. Some of us had been in treatment before where we “told them what they wanted to hear.” Many of us were in trouble and had lied to police and probation officers.

Sometimes we lied by saying things that were not true. Sometimes we lied by hiding the truth. (We used many different excuses for lying, such as: “Well, you never asked, so I didn’t tell you.”) For us, it was hard to tell the truth. But to make a good life, we had to be honest with ourselves, and honest with the people we could trust.

Challenge Two: We looked at what we liked about alcohol and other drugs, and why we were using them.

It All Seemed So Obvious

We said we knew **why** we were drinking or doing drugs:

- * Because we liked it.
- * Because it was fun.
- * Because it felt good.
- * Because we wanted to.
- * Because we wanted good feelings.
- * Because there is nothing wrong with it.

We said we knew **when** we did drugs:

- * When they were there.
- * When we felt like it.

But there was more to it. We had to dig deeper to get the whole picture. What did we specifically like about drugs? What was it about each drug that made us feel good? What feelings did we want? When did we want to do drugs? We had to understand the bigger picture of where alcohol and other drugs fit in our lives.

Challenge Two: We looked at what we liked about alcohol and other drugs, and why we were you using them.

Peer Pressure

It seemed that many adults tried to explain our alcohol and other drug use in terms of peer pressure. They thought we were forced into using drugs and that our biggest problem was the friends we chose. They found it hard to believe that most of us actually wanted to use drugs.

It is true that some of us did hang out with peers who tried to pressure us into using drugs. And, some of us did use drugs in order to fit in with the group. But most of us did not have friends trying to push it on us.

We did, however, eventually discover that peers influenced our drug use. It's not as if they needed to push drugs on us. It was more that we were with a group that was using, and we automatically went ahead and used. We all kind of expected it from each other. We just did it. Like, there were parties where everyone assumed that lots of people would get "wasted." So we got wasted. Like, someone would hand us a bong. So we smoked it, without even thinking twice. It was a lifestyle for us. In some cases we could have said "no" without creating a problem. In some cases we might have been urged to participate. In some cases there would be intense pressure. Often it only took the slightest encouragement for us to join in.

Challenge Three: We looked at our use of alcohol and other drugs to see if it had caused harm, or could cause harm.

What We Did Not Do

Sometimes harm is best understood by what did **not** happen that should have happened. All the time we were doing alcohol and other drugs, there were things we should have been doing, such as: going to school and preparing for a career; learning to feel comfortable with male and female friends (without being buzzed or high); learning to solve problems; learning to cope with stress; learning to cope with pain, anger and other strong feelings; learning to have fun and excitement in our lives (without drugs); and figuring out what we believed in, and where we wanted to go in life.

While we were using drugs, many of us did not learn things we should have been learning. We stopped growing up in certain important ways. This type of harm is the most difficult harm to see because it sneaks up on you in the future. We kept saying: “Drugs haven’t caused me any problems.” Some of us only discovered the harm years later when we had the body of young adults and the mind of a young teenager. Some of us were lucky enough to see this potential harm and do something about it before the damage was serious.

We discovered that we were relying on drugs more than we cared to admit. We could see we might be heading toward trouble because drugs were the only way, or the main way, to cope with life. Drugs were becoming too important to us. We had to learn to meet our needs without relying on them.

Challenge Three: We looked at our use of alcohol and other drugs to see if it had caused harm, or could cause harm.

Covering Up

When we saw harm or potential harm, we sometimes tried to make ourselves feel better by comparing ourselves to others:

“Oh, I’m not as bad as (the person we knew with the worst problem), so I’m OK.”

Many of us made excuses. We said we had it “so tough” that we had to use alcohol or other drugs. We were quick to blame others: It was all our parents’ fault, or the fault of our school. We didn’t clearly see our own share of responsibility in what we were doing.

Many of us covered up our concerns with a phony: “I don’t care.” We sort of felt that way, but if we were truly honest with ourselves, we did care. We were afraid of what was happening, and faking that it didn’t matter.

Whether it was our fault or not, mistreated or not, good excuse or not, we still had to look at the effects of our drug use. Each of us had to ask: Are drugs hurting me? Am I better off or worse now, than I was before I started using drugs?

Challenge Four: We looked at our responsibility and the responsibility of others for our problems.

Drug-Using Lifestyle

Many adults and even some friends thought that using alcohol and other drugs was our main problem. For some of us, it was. But often drugs were simply one part of a much bigger problem. Sometimes the drug problem came after other problems...and made things worse.

It wasn't as if drugs were over here on one side, and the rest of our life was over there. It was all connected. Some of us began to realize that we had a certain lifestyle that included alcohol and other drugs. When we described that lifestyle, we came up with common threads: We found we were in lots of conflict with adults, doing poorly in school, telling many lies, and breaking or bending rules and laws. Some of us had been arrested. We had become self-centered. We were in lots of pain, whether we admitted it or not. We were scared. We were on the run. We said we didn't care. We tried to forget our pain. We tried to ignore or forget problems. We tried to act cool. We thought more about feeling good right now than about the long-term future. Some of us were reckless and impulsive, and did things without thinking. Some of us were defiant and rebellious. Some of us were just unhappy and withdrawn. Most of all, we were going nowhere in terms of a future.

If we were going to make changes about using drugs, we would need to look at our whole lifestyle.

Challenge Four: We looked at our responsibility and the responsibility of others for our problems.

Losing Battles

It took us a long time to realize how little we knew about power. Some of us went to major extremes. We wouldn't budge for anyone. We always challenged authority head-on. We were defiant and aggressive.

Many of our fights got worse with insults, challenges, attacks, and counter-attacks. We got into lots of big blow-ups.

One way to show anger was by defiance. That is, we did whatever adults told us **not** to do. It showed our anger, but never got us what we really wanted. We hated to admit how many battles we were losing. As a consequence, some of us were sent to "juvey," to the Department of Corrections, and to treatment centers where we lost our freedom.

We felt good when we got tough, but in truth, seldom achieved what we wanted. Often our tactics backfired. We found that the more defiant we were, the more we lost our freedom and got punished. Pushed over the edge, some of us said we had nothing to lose and did some very crazy things. But we were wrong. There was more to lose...and we lost it.

We found we were unable to pause, to think, and to figure out what was the **smart** thing to do. It was like we didn't have many choices. By habit, we instantly and automatically got angry and defiant. This seemed to get us in more trouble.

Many of us didn't know how to be strong in ways that were not aggressive. The only power we understood was head to head confrontation. We had to learn new ways to deal with intense feelings, and new ways to be powerful.

We needed to find positive ways to deal with anger and other strong emotions.

Challenge Four: We looked at our responsibility and the responsibility of others for our problems.

Right And Wrong

As we got more into the drug lifestyle and made some poor choices in terms of friends, some of us began to lose sight of right and wrong. We lost sight of what we believed in. In our own pain, we hurt others, including people who cared about us.

One girl talked about stealing purses from old women at the mall with her friends. She said she didn't feel bad about it. Someone talked about hitting an old man. Some of us had scared and stolen from little kids. We broke into houses, stole sound systems, took cars joyriding, and destroyed property. We drove recklessly.

For some of us, it became easy to steal, to physically hurt people, to bully, or to tease. It became our way of having fun and excitement. We didn't care about other people — or didn't allow ourselves to care. Sometimes we said, "It's their own fault."

In extreme cases, some of us got addicted to the excitement of doing wrong, breaking rules, defying authority, hurting other people and trying to get away with it. We liked the excitement of fooling our parents, or even running from the police. We liked bragging about our "accomplishments." It became our idea of fun. We were hooked and didn't feel we could stop. Sometimes we knew something was wrong, told ourselves to stop, but couldn't. Or we did things without even thinking. If we had paused to think, we would have known it was wrong.

To different degrees many of us lost a sense of morality. We had no conscience. There was always an excuse for wrongdoing: "Well, people would break into my house, so I do it to others." We were self-centered and said, "We just do it for fun."

Some of us hurt people without remorse, even people we loved. This became part of the drug using lifestyle.

We needed self-control. We needed to learn to care about others.

Challenge Five: We thought about where we seemed to be headed, where we wanted to go, and what we wanted to accomplish.

Quick Fix

Mind altering drugs work wonders for people who live for the moment. They offer instant fun. They can make you feel happy, brave, energetic, or nothing at all. They can stop you from feeling angry, scared, sad, or hurt. They give you control over what you feel. They give you courage. They're a quick fix.

But alcohol and other drugs don't solve problems. Rather, they create a set of problems of their own. Our challenge was to look at the big picture, to ask ourselves how drugs were affecting our lives right now, and how they might affect our future.

On some level we knew we had been trading momentary pleasure for a grim future. We could see that we were avoiding things. We were letting problems persist. We weren't learning to cope with reality.

It felt better not to go to school and not to work than it did to take responsibility for our lives. This was fine as long as our parents, or other adults, put a roof over our heads and provided our meals. But this couldn't go on forever.

If nothing changed and we kept going the way we were headed, we would become adults without an education, in unhealthy relationships, and unprepared to deal with life. Some of us would end up in prison, or dead, or going to treatment centers, over and over again. We would never be prepared to get jobs that would allow us to live comfortably.

If we wanted more than instant pleasure, we knew we needed to face the challenge of deciding what sort of person we wanted to be, and where we wanted to go. We needed to take the time to think carefully about our future.

Challenge Five: We thought about where we seemed to be headed, where we wanted to go, and what we wanted to accomplish.

We Had To Think About What Was Important

We started to think about what was important to us. We tried to remember our dreams. It was important to have new goals and new dreams. We thought about our families, our values, and our place in the world. For some of us, religion and spiritual beliefs were important. We thought about the people who loved us. We thought about what we wanted to do in life. We thought about having loving relationships and getting jobs. Some of us thought about some day creating our own families and making a contribution to the world.

We started to think about whether the way we were leading our lives fit with what we believed and what we wanted to achieve. We asked ourselves: If we kept heading the way we were heading, where would this lead?

One guy who wanted to graduate from high school in four years was shocked when he realized he was supposed to be a junior, but only had one semester worth of credits.

Challenge Six: We made thoughtful decisions about our lives and about our use of alcohol and other drugs.

Big Changes That Go Together

We were getting something we wanted from using alcohol and other drugs. If we stopped using them, we needed to figure out other ways to meet our needs. Not only that: All the feelings we were trying to hide would come back if we stopped drinking and doing drugs.

It wasn't as if we could just stop doing drugs without changing our whole lifestyles. If we stopped, it would mean finding new ways to have fun. It would mean making new friends and spending our time differently. We would have to find new ways to deal with anger, pain, stress and fear.

We would be choosing success and a future. This meant working harder, in school or at jobs. We would have to learn to face our problems.

Putting an end to drug abuse or drug dependency would go hand in hand with changing the rest of our lives.

Challenge Six: We made thoughtful decisions about our lives and about our use of alcohol and other drugs.

We Didn't Want To Give Up Drugs

Many of us were either abusing alcohol or other drugs — or were dependent on them. Eventually we realized that the best chance we had of overcoming our problems would be to completely stop using drugs. But we fought off this realization with everything we had.

Drugs were so important that we didn't let go easily. For some of us, they were our whole way of life. It didn't feel normal to go through a day, or any part of it, without alcohol or other drugs. For some of us, drugs were the only way we knew how to cope with intense feelings. For some of us, they were all we thought about when we thought about having a good time. Drugs became our best friend. We loved them and didn't want to give them up. We wanted to think that we were in control, but were surprised to discover how much we had allowed drugs to control us.

Although we saw the harm and potential harm, we didn't want to stop. We tried to rewrite our story.

We said the problems were all in the past. We made excuses for the drug use. We said our drug use wasn't so bad after all.

We blamed it on our situation: "Everyone gets high in my neighborhood. There's no escaping it." Some of us really did come from neighborhoods in which drug use was heavy. But we had a choice. We could be like everyone else — with little hope for a good future. Or we could be different and rise above it. We asked ourselves: Where will our friends be in ten years? Where did we want to be? It's not easy to make big changes. But we knew we had to do it.

Challenge Six: We made thoughtful decisions about our lives and about our use of alcohol and other drugs.

Lapse And Relapse

We wanted to believe in ourselves to do what we set out to do. If we said we wanted to stop using drugs, we hoped to be 100% successful. But we weren't all successful in our first try. Sometimes we fell short of our goals and drank or did drugs when we said we would not.

It was important to strive to do well, but also accept that mistakes and setbacks are sometimes part of life. We didn't want to slip all the way back to where we were before. We learned the difference between a lapse (where we blew it once) and a relapse (where we tumbled all the way back to where we were in the first place).

Some of us had lapses and even relapses. It was important to learn from our setbacks so that we could be successful in the end.

It takes courage to overcome drug abuse and drug dependence and to change your lifestyle. We made thoughtful decisions and set our sights high. We made plans for success. We knew we would have to find other ways to "feel good" without drugs. We knew we would have to make plans to avoid slips when we felt urges to get high. We knew we would have to bounce back from setbacks. But we were ready for action.

Challenge Seven: We followed through on our decisions... If we saw problems, we went back to earlier challenges and mastered them.

Painful Times/Finding Our Strength

Alcohol and other drugs had been an easy way to deal with life. Now that we took away the crutch, we needed to **learn to endure pain**. We were no longer burying problems. We had to feel the unpleasant feelings we had been avoiding with drugs. At the same time we had to change our lifestyle. Eventually we knew we would have better lives with less pain. We would find better ways to deal with problems. We would find better ways to cope with life. In the meantime we had to be strong. At least we no longer felt as if we were on the run.

Our minds became clearer. We felt our strength. As we challenged ourselves to make good decisions and a good life, we began to accept and honor ourselves. For some of us, this was new. It was the beginning of a new type of self-respect.

Challenge Seven: We followed through on our decisions... If we saw problems, we went back to earlier challenges and mastered them.

Caring About Others

Doing alcohol and other drugs is a personal, self-centered activity. When you use drugs, you focus on your own pleasure or on trying to stop your own pain.

Self-centeredness becomes a problem for people who abuse drugs. They often do things that hurt other people, even the people they love. When drug use reaches the level of dependency, people become very self-centered. All they think about is themselves and getting more drugs. They feel lonely even when other people surround them.

After we made thoughtful decisions about drug use and started to solve our problems, our lives really improved. We felt tremendous energy. We had clarity of mind. One of the great benefits was that we began to feel more connected to other people in positive ways. Part of really recovering meant reaching out and forming close friendships. It also meant repairing damage we had done in our families and communities.

As we connected with others, we started liking ourselves more. We found we were kinder, more honest, and more respectful. We had more love in our heart and a stronger sense of justice. We had peace of mind that we lacked before.