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# Real Life Real talk

**Hey guys, Rasheem here!** I'm 22 and I live in Kingston Jamaica. I know how easy it can be for teens to access and abuse alcohol and tobacco, as it was for me. So I decided to head to the streets of Jamaica and talk to other young people about the pressures and influences they see around them today. As I walked by my old high school, I remembered how the bars around my school were open as early as 8 AM. For those of us that looked old enough, that could even be our breakfast!



**First, I met up with Kimarly** and he pointed out the spots where young people hang out on Friday nights to grab a smoke or some rum. His friends kept saying, "oh just try one drink man!" One drink turned into two and then three. Before he even had a chance to realize what was happening, things got out of control.



**I then bumped into Deandra** and we got to talking. She started telling me about her past with marijuana. After a traumatic experience, she didn't have anyone to turn to. That's when she got mixed up with alcohol and marijuana. People told her that it could help comfort and calm her so she used to sneak out of the house and ask her older friends, who had the hook up, to get her drinks and joints. After a while though, she realized that this was just a temporary fix and she needed help.

**I then went to see Jerome**, lovingly known as "Uncle Jerome," who runs Teen Hub and supports young people in the Kingston area. The young people at Teen Hub told me about how using alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana was the main way they knew how to cope with difficult emotions. Pressure that comes from parents about school was a real thing for them - and marijuana was often a way for them to take the edge off before an exam.

Having such easy access to these substances didn't help either. The teens said they could go to the corner shop or supermarket and get some rum - no questions asked. At parties, everyone was drinking and smoking. They didn't want to feel them left out, so they tried it too.



They also talked about how seeing social media influencers and celebrities in music videos made smoking and drinking part of a rich, cool, and glamorous lifestyle. Society makes us think that drinking and smoking can make our life better, but does it really? As young people, we have the power to be aware and make better choices for ourselves.

Keep reading to learn more about how drinking and smoking affects us. Together, we can stay informed and take action to make our communities safer and healthier.

This is Rasheem signing off!



# KNOW the facts:

# 1

About 70% of young people around the world don't use alcohol.

Young people around the world recognize that alcohol is not good for our health. In a recent global U-Report poll:

48%

of you felt that drinking alcohol is dangerous and damages your health

34%

of you felt that even moderate drinking is dangerous

75%

of you felt that tobacco is bad for your health.



Drinking and smoking will not make you feel better, help you socialize, or make you fit in. Your generation has the power to change the way we all think about and use substances. You are already leading the way!

# 2

There are a lot of factors that can influence our decision to use alcohol or tobacco,

Such as images and messages of influencers and celebrities, adults that drink and smoke around us, our friends and classmates, or even advertisements that make alcohol and tobacco look cool.



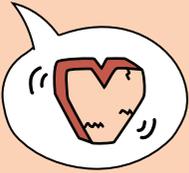
Make sure you know the facts and come up with a few ways to protect yourself from these influences so that YOU can make the choices that you really want.

# 3

Drinking alcohol interferes with your ability to do basic things like see, hear, talk, walk, control your emotions, and make decisions.

## thinking

**Prefrontal cortex** is the part of our brain that is responsible for our thought processes and decision making. This area is **most affected by alcohol** and even small amounts can change our ability to make **safe choices** and **behave appropriately** in social situations.



## body functions

The **medulla** is an area of our brain that controls automatic body functions like breathing and our heart rate. Essentially, **the medulla helps keep us alive without us even knowing it!** Alcohol causes the medulla to **slow down** or stop working altogether. This can **slow our breathing** and even **lower our heart rate**, which is life-threatening.



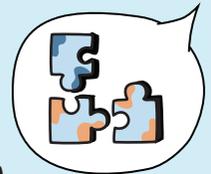
## Coordination

**Cerebellum** is the part of our brain that controls balance and muscle coordination. **Drinking alcohol inhibits our motor function and slows our reaction times**, which is why it is difficult and dangerous to operate a

vehicle after drinking. It is also why people may stumble when walking or slur their speech when talking.

## memory & Learning

The **hippocampus** is responsible for learning and memory. When alcohol is consumed, it can block the hippocampus from performing these functions, which can **cause difficulty focusing in school and in learning new skill**. During this time in our lives, our brains are still developing and **the most serious alcohol-related brain damage happens at the hippocampus**.



## FIVE SENSES

The **cerebral cortex** receives information from different parts of our body. **Alcohol slows down our brain's ability to receive information** and it may lead to blurred vision and a dull sense of smell, taste, touch, and hearing. This would **make it hard for us to do even simple everyday tasks** and would also lead to injuries.



# 4

The human brain doesn't finish developing until your mid-20s.

### Underage drinking interferes with brain development

and can even lead to addiction or alcohol use issues for the rest of our lives. This is why drinking is more harmful to adolescents than adults.



# 5

We are more likely to take risks when we are around our friends.

If you feel like you are being pressured to drink, try one of these 5 ways to say "no":



I'll have to pass. I have plans early in the morning.

I'll get something later if I want but I'm good for now

I have a really bad headache right now. I need to get some water.

No thanks, drinking makes me feel really sick so I can't.



You might even want to find a buddy who has similar views about alcohol use. Having a support system can make a big difference!

# 6

Media is powerful.

We are all bombarded with images of alcohol and tobacco - through advertisements, social media posts, movies, and other digital content that we stream.

**These images give us the impression that drinking and smoking are normal or even cool... but are they?**



Expectation

VS



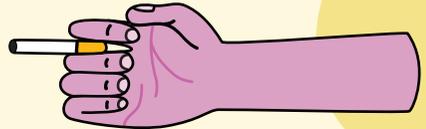
Reality

# 7

Have you ever wondered what is actually in a cigarette?



+ Over 7000 other hazardous chemicals!



# 8

Inhaling these chemicals can damage every part of your body.



When we first smoke we will probably cough, **that's actually our body's way of telling us that what we are inhaling is not good for us.** Tobacco also weakens our immune system, which makes it harder for us to fight off illnesses like COVID-19.

**It also affects our brain by creating dependency,** making it hard for us to go even a few hours without nicotine and causing us to feel the symptoms of withdrawal including difficulty focusing and jitteriness. Tobacco also increases our risk of cancer and heart disease.

## Did you know?

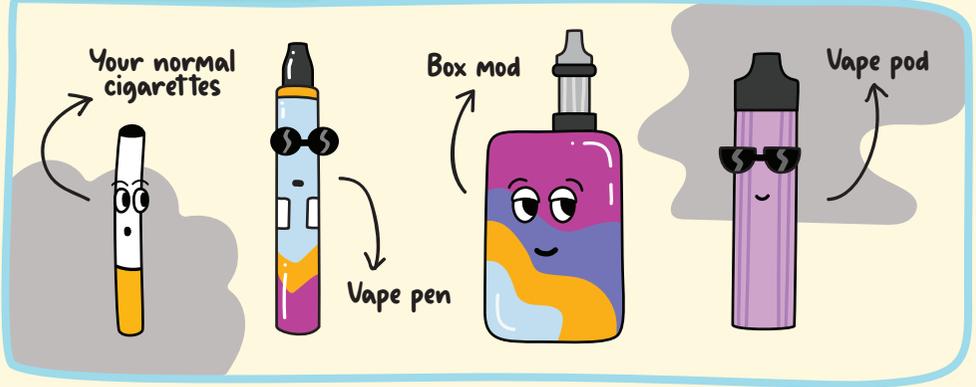
It takes nicotine only 10-20 seconds to reach our brain from the first puff. Nicotine is highly addictive and wires our brain to crave it throughout our lifetime. 9 out of 10 adult smokers started before they turned 18.

# 9

The tobacco industry knows young people have caught on to how harmful smoking is.

So, they are promoting their products in different forms and suggesting that there are "healthier alternatives," which is not entirely true...

## Evolution of Cigarettes



Different colors and flavors like cotton candy, banana split, watermelon, and many more are being used to entice younger consumers, but it is important to remember that **regardless of its form, using tobacco has harmful effects on all of us.**



# think about it!

## Form your own opinions about alcohol and tobacco use.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions below- these are supposed to spark conversation and ideas!

*Should media and entertainment companies be held responsible for alcohol/tobacco related images they promote? What kind of impact could mandatory warning labels on media content about substance use promotion have? What about making companies pay taxes on producing content that promotes substance use?*

*Have you ever been in a situation where you had the chance to drink or smoke? Did you feel pressured or curious to try? Why or why not? What advice would you give a friend who is going to party where heavy drinking and smoking will be involved?*

*Sometimes people turn to alcohol or other substances to avoid facing feelings of stress, loneliness, sadness or boredom. What are 3 healthier options you can suggest to a friend coping with these feelings?*

*Alcohol and tobacco use among teens is illegal in most places, why do you think so many teens are still able to drink and smoke? What makes it hard to say no to drinking alcohol and smoking?*

*What kind of decisions about alcohol and tobacco use do the adults in your life make? Do you agree or disagree with these decisions?*

*Why is drinking and smoking particularly harmful to teens (as compared to adults)? If you could set the legal age for drinking in your country, what would it be? If you could set the legal age for smoking in your country, what would it be?*

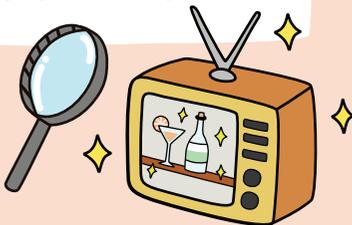
*What do you think about the statement "alcohol can make you feel happier." Do you agree or disagree? Why? What are other things that would make you feel equally if not more, happy?*

# Make a Difference

No matter what your relationship with alcohol and tobacco is right now, there are always steps you can take for improving your health and the health of those around you. Here are some ideas to get you started!

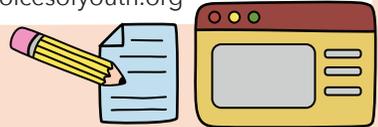
## Picture This!

Use your investigative skills to capture photos of anything around you that tries to make alcohol and tobacco look appealing. This can help you become more aware of the influences around you. Show us what you see by tagging @voicesofyouth.



## Express Yourself!

Share your thoughts about alcohol and tobacco by submitting a piece to [www.voicesofyouth.org](http://www.voicesofyouth.org)



## Pass it On!

Share something you've learned here with one other person and spark a conversation!



Let us know what other ideas you come up with by tagging us or leaving a comment @voicesofyouth (twitter and IG). Stay tuned for IG lives, challenges, and more on this!

**If you are struggling with alcohol, tobacco, or any kind of substance use, we encourage you to seek help from a trusted adult or search online for available support in your country. Asking for help is a sign of strength - it shows self-awareness and courage to overcome something difficult.**

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