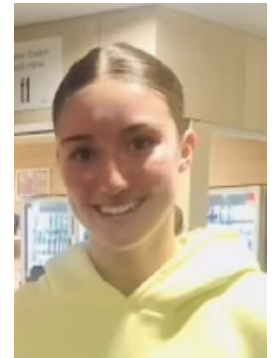


ROTARY ACTION GROUP – ADDICTION PREVENTION (RAGAP) INFLUENCER NEWS

Drug Free Australia was selected by the RAG AP as its partner NGO for Oceania. In March this year, we were honoured to have two representatives who were 'Youth Prevention Influencers' at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna. These two young people presented powerful drug prevention messages at a Side Event meeting. Here is one presentation by Eva, a 16 year old Youth Prevention Influencer from Australia:



It is an Honour to address the Commission on Narcotic Drugs here at the United Nations in Vienna as a youth prevention advocate from Australia.

I would like to start with a simple question - why do drugs work so well on young people? It is biological, during adolescence, the brain is essentially under construction. The systems responsible for reward, motivation and excitement develop earlier than the systems responsible for long term judgement. In other words the accelerator develops before the brakes. Drugs exploit that imbalance. Substances like nicotine rapidly increase dopamine – the neurotransmitter that tells the brain, this feels good, remember this, do it again. The brain learns fast. Sometimes too fast.

But here is the important part of the story. Dopamine was never designed for drugs. Dopamine evolved to reward effort, progress, and survival – the satisfaction of solving a challenge, achieving a goal, or succeeding together as a group. In other words, our brains were built to feel good when we do hard things. And that's where sport enters the conversation! Intense physical activity increases dopamine. It releases endorphins that elevate mood. It stabilises serotonin pathways linked to emotional wellbeing. And when it happens in a team environment, it even releases oxytocin – the hormone that strengthens trust and social connection. From a neuroscience perspective, team sport is almost the perfect prevention program. It provides challenge. It provides belonging. And it provides a powerful, natural reward system that strengthens rather than damages the brain. As an Athlete, I have experienced this many times. Anyone who has trained with a team knows the feeling – the moment when exhaustion turns into momentum, when the whole group is pushing together, when the whistle blows and suddenly the entire team erupts with energy. That feeling is chemistry. But it is healthy chemistry. It is the brain rewarding effort, discipline and cooperation. And importantly, it creates something drugs cannot replicate: meaning. Because the real opposite of addiction is not simply sobriety. It is connection. And this is why prevention must be more than warnings and statistics. It must involve environments that give young people the opportunity to experience achievement, belonging and purpose.

In Australia, nearly one in three secondary school students has already experimented with vaping. Among older teenagers, more than one in five report using e-cigarettes in the past month. This number tells us something important: young people are clearly searching for reward and stimulation.

Our responsibility is to make sure the healthiest pathways are the most accessible ones. Because when a young person finds their team, their passion, and their purpose, the artificial rewards of drug use lose much of their attraction.

If we want to change the future of drug use, we must think like the brain. Invest in environments that reward effort. Invest in communities that build connection. And invest in prevention early enough that young people discover their potential before substances try to define it.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON 'LIVED EXPERIENCE' SHARED WITH DRUG FREE AUSTRALIA:

RJ'S STORY



Australian Recovery Centres

Hi, I'm RJ Menzies and I'm the Partnerships General Manager of a charity called Australian Recovery Centres. I am in recovery myself and in February 2026 I celebrated 6 years clean!

Prior to entering recovery I worked in the Luxury Tourism / Hospitality Industry for over 10 years... and I was in active drug and alcohol addiction the whole time. When I got sober I turned my attention towards working in the Mental Health Industry, and I have had a very colourful career so far. I have experience working in the Private and Public systems, in Residential Rehabs, in Halfway Houses, Homeless Health and Drop-In Mental Health Spaces both within Australia and abroad. I have volunteered and worked in all of these environments in a wide variety of roles. Last year I was nominated for two Citizen of the Year awards in Byron Bay. I volunteered at Fletcher St Cottage, I am on the Lived Experience Advisory Board of The Buttery and I was even a patrolling member of Byron Bay Surf Life Saving Club. However it was mainly my efforts in the Addiction / Mental Health space which drew the most attention. I would regularly go to hospitals, rehabs and even prisons to give presentations about addiction, recovery and spirituality.

While this is all well and good it is essentially important for me to remember the severity of my addiction and the long road I took to sobriety.

These days I continue membership in 12-step meetings and my work as the Partnerships General Manager of Australian Recovery Centres (ARC) keeps me accountable. ARC is a charity that was set up by the students and colleagues of the late esteemed psychologist Jim Maclaine with the simple purpose of treating addiction. Those students are now at the top of their respective fields and are practising from coast to coast. We have identified a gap in the Continuing Care Space and we are determined to open a Halfway House. A Halfway House is essentially a residential stepping stone for those who are leaving rehab and looking to integrate back into society. It is a community of sober and likeminded people helping each other live their best lives! This will look like a large property, hopefully with some animals roaming around and where we could offer a variety of services to the surrounding community, such as men's circles. This will serve the individual, their families and (by preventing relapse) it will serve the local community.

In my opinion homelessness and addiction are not mutually exclusive. When I was in my addiction I experienced bouts of homelessness, including having no fixed address for many years. I thought I had a medley of Mental Health issues that I was trying to medicate with drugs and alcohol. Turns out all I had was addiction, turns out the medicine is learning about recovery from another addict and turns out the cure is helping others to do the same.

I am looking to connect with anyone and everyone that works or volunteers in Mental Health, Addiction, Homelessness and/or any of the Social Services. ARC has begun searching for a suitable facility to use as a Halfway House, so if you know of one please reach out to me at admin@australianrecovery.com

Thanks very much to Drug Free Australia for the work they do and for allowing me to share my story.

KERRYIN'S KORNER

While representing DFA, I recently attended a dinner with former champion AFL player, Ben Cousins as guest speaker. Peter Richardson from DACA was hosting Ben and he set up an interview style forum.

Despite all of Ben's fame on the football field and infamy off the field, I found him to be quite humble as he shared many stories from both his illustrious footy career and his devastating addiction years, which included three stints in prison. Among the footy memories, Ben shared a few very interesting insights, that certainly revealed signs of the path to his fall.

Ben spoke of always being totally driven as a football player, to the point where his West Coast coach spoke with his father about the dangers of pushing too hard. He then commented that he was filled with the same drive when the door was opened to drug use. According to Ben, anything he did was always to the extreme, even as a young boy. Eventually, Ben was diagnosed with ADHD a couple of times before he finally decided to try the ADHD medication. Ben's comment was that the medication was life-changing. I guess you could say this explains a lot. But of course, he made choices and there are always consequences for our choices. A fact that Ben referred to in his talk. And naturally, there was regret, especially for what he'd put others through.

What was interesting was that Ben commented that the first drug he ever tried was marijuana. He said that he only used it a few times, as he didn't like how it affected him. However, the fact remains that this was the first door to open into the drug world for Ben and he set about trying other drugs, like ecstasy, then speed, cocaine and eventually Ice.

In the height of his struggles with methamphetamines, and despite his incredible sustained high-level performance on-field, Ben was eventually "sacked" as a player for the West Coast Eagles. He said that he was totally shocked. He did not see this coming. I saw this as a sign that, in the midst of addiction, he could not really see how far he had fallen. This is typical of addiction. The user often can't see what everyone else can.



When Ben was later signed up with the Richmond FC, he mentioned that it was the first time ever that he had been on the draft for selection and he was the very last person to be selected. Ben had always been chased by several teams. This was a wake-up call for him, and he commented that he would have struggled to cope if he hadn't been picked up at all.

Ben stated that the ultimate turning point in his out-of-control life was following his third stint in jail. He finally realized that as a father, he had responsibilities for his children and family. This epiphany eventually sent Ben on the path to recovery.

One other valuable comment Ben made was that he'd reached out for help and had many counselling sessions. Something he highly recommended to anyone struggling with addiction.

As a person who also shares a devastating lived experience, I could easily relate to Ben's struggles, despite the years between us and our very different backgrounds. The story is still the same. Addiction sneaks up on you and changes everything. Drugs destroy lives.



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIA?

FIND OUT HERE >

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE WORLD?

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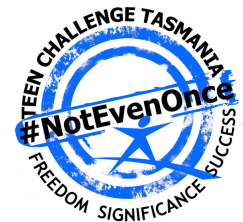
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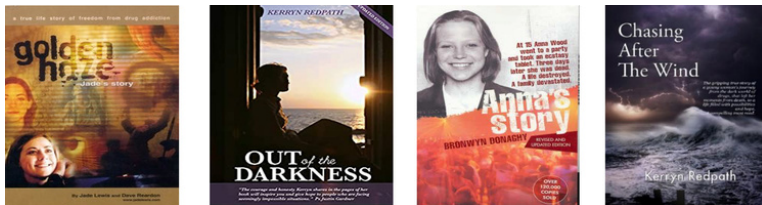


RESOURCES

Click on the images below to access the online resources



Books and more...



For WCTU Primary & Secondary programs contact Dawn Stark: drug-free@bigpond.com

DAESY



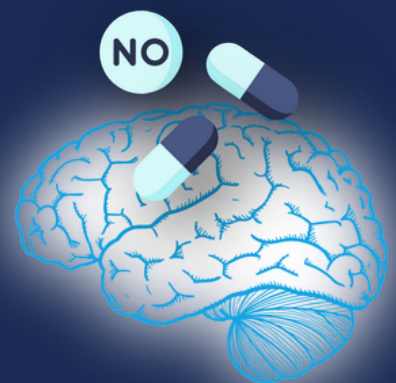
For more information on any of the above, contact: admin@drugfree.org.au

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