

Education | ‘Numb or Nourish’ healthy choice program rolls out in Marin

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Help is on the way for Marin parents who may unconsciously turn to a nightly glass of wine, a puff of marijuana or big bowl of ice cream to cope with the multiple stresses of daily life.

The help, in the form of a program called “Numb or Nourish,” is a free system of self-awareness tools and mini-skills that can, over time, slow or even stop the habit of using substances to numb mental or emotional discomfort.

The campaign is targeted this summer for parents, said Kelsey Fernandez, executive director of Marin Healthy Youth Partnerships, which is spearheading the effort.

“We decided to move forward with the adult campaign, which is around healthy choices, modeling, gaining knowledge and skill-building practices, with the idea that they would then bring it to their families,” Fernandez said.

Information about the program for adults began posting about two weeks ago on social media, newsletters, a website and at bus shelters, she said.

In the fall, the agency and its collaborating groups will work with Marin youth leaders to set up a peer-to-peer campaign that will address pre-teens and teens directly, Fernandez said.

“The idea is to set up these protective factors that can help delay or prevent underage substance use — and also set up protective factors for some of the other things we’re seeing our youth are struggling with in our community,” Fernandez said. “Mental health issues, connection issues, anxiety.”

In the April 2022 “County Health Rankings and Roadmap,” Marin is listed as one of California’s healthiest counties. However, it also reports that 21% of Marin adults binge drink or drink heavily, compared to the statewide average of 19%.

In addition, the “California Healthy Kids Survey” reports that Marin 11th graders’ past 30-day use of e-cigarettes is nearly triple the state average — 28% vs. 10%. Their rate of binge drinking is 25%, or double the state average of 12%, the survey said.

Also, Marin 11th graders’ past 30-day cannabis use rate is the highest in California at 32% compared to the average of 17%.

Kathy Koblick, public health division director at Marin Health and Human Services, said the program teaches people how to pause first, and then how to reflect before making a conscious decision to drink, use drugs or overeat — or not.

“Learning how to create space and reflect before taking action is a gift that adults can model for youth,” Koblick said in an email. “This can really help change the direction that is taken and ultimately lead to better choices that support health and happiness.”

The first step in the program, pausing, can be as simple as taking a few deep breaths or imagining oneself “grounding” into the earth. Reflection, the second step, can range from weighing the pros and cons to reaching out for support. The third step, making a conscious decision, can include a personal commitment, advance planning or sharing with a friend.

“The campaign prompts us to evaluate each choice and ask ourselves, ‘Is this numbing or nourishing?’” said Alexa Davidson of West Marin Coalition for Healthy Youth.

“It does not judge behaviors, but rather encourages intention-based decisions,” Davidson added. “Through adult modeling, the campaign builds upon substance use prevention efforts across the county.”

According to Fernandez, Jessica Colvin, wellness director for the Tamalpais Union High School District and a board member of the Marin Healthy Youth Partnership, suggested the idea for the program at a board meeting. Those at the meeting were immediately interested, Fernandez said.

“I have been practicing the Numb or Nourish method by regularly asking myself, ‘Will this decision numb or nourish me?’” Colvin said in an email.

“I shared this strategy at a MHYP meeting and it inspired members to create a community-wide campaign,” she added. “My hope is that these concepts help the adults in our community make and model healthy decisions and that our young people will learn to do the same.”

The focus of the campaign is not to eliminate substance use, but to enable people to consider alternative conscious choices. In addition to creating space around alcohol use, drugs or overeating, it could apply to everything from smoking cigarettes to drinking coffee or overusing cellphones or other technology.

“Nicotine addiction is extremely difficult to overcome, but the tools that Numb or Nourish provides can help individuals focus on their motivation for quitting — or not starting,” Sayra Soriano, youth tobacco prevention and cessation educator, said in an email.

Fernandez said the program will be supplemented this fall through “Let’s Talk,” a booklet that goes out in August to about 5,000 families of sixth- and ninth-graders to educate them about youth substance use, and other ongoing efforts. The schools portion is coordinated with the

help of the Marin County Office of Education, another of the collaborating agencies.

The agencies also plan to produce some short videos on the program using a professional Bay Area life coach who employs the techniques in her practice.

“The goal of Marin Healthy Youth Partnership is to change the community norms — that’s the long game,” Fernandez said.

“This is not something that’s going to happen quick,” she added. “It’s a way to have a conversation about it.”