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Letters | To teach Hong Kong youth about the risks of drinking, start with the mind

Just offering lessons on the negative effects of alcohol use is neither sufficient nor effective, as effective education starts with reducing stigma around drinking

Alcohol abuse prevention must include mental health education, including helping young people develop healthy strategies for coping with stress and supporting their peers

Topic | **Mental health**



Letters

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Patrick, now 22, had his first alcoholic beverage when he was just 14. Self-described as short in stature and shy, Patrick wondered why his peers seemed to be so much smarter, more confident and better-looking than he was and felt an overwhelming sense of aimlessness about his future.

“I know that drinking isn’t an effective way for me to deal with stress,” he says, “but I just don’t know what I can do to stop feeling anxious and hopeless.” He found that alcohol could give him a reprieve from his negative thoughts, and although he hated the bitter taste, he liked the hazy feeling of being drunk and the [escape from reality](#).

Patrick’s story is one my team hears often in our work with young people. While all of us worry about the future and compare ourselves to our peers, these thoughts can be especially overwhelming for young people who are still [learning coping strategies](#).

In our conversations with young people, it's clear that while they are intellectually aware of the risks associated with alcohol use: drinking has become normalised in our culture and many feel the risks don't apply to them personally. Many, like Patrick, see few alternatives to drinking.

This World No Alcohol Day, on October 2, it's time we took a different approach to alcohol education. Simply offering textbook lessons about the negative effects of alcohol use are neither sufficient nor effective. Effective education starts with reducing stigma around alcohol use.



Self-medicating with alcohol can lead to dependency ... creating more complex mental health problems down the road

Through sharing real-life stories and creating safe spaces for conversation, young people can see they are not alone and feel empowered to seek help. Additionally, by involving young people in developing their own resources to educate and supporting their peers, they can have the opportunity to actively engage with the materials and take ownership of their own learning.

Finally, alcohol prevention must include mental health education. This includes helping young people develop healthy strategies for coping with stress and supporting their peers, as well as directing them to additional support services such as counselling hotlines.

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For young people like Patrick who struggle with poor mental health, alcohol can seem like the only option to deal with stress. Self-medicating with alcohol can lead to dependency, though, creating more complex mental health problems down the road. Preventing alcohol use among young people starts with an investment in robust mental health support.

Sky Siu, executive director, KELY Support Group