Dear Alice,

I think it would be a good idea for me to stop smoking marijuana and cut down on my drinking, at least during the school year. The problem is, I have been doing it for so long it is almost as though I have forgotten how to have fun without it. Contributing to this problem is the fact that many of my friends smoke or drink to have fun. Many of my other friends just do not seem to have fun at all; they stay in Friday and Saturday nights to do work. I've found it difficult to quit, I think because I'm just not sure of what's out there to do that's fun without being stoned or drunk. Can you recommend anything that's fun whether you're intoxicated or sober, so that I don't have to stop hanging out with certain friends if I want to relax and have fun? I want to finally enjoy life without relying on an altered state of consciousness. What's there to do when you're sick of renting movies? Also, any tips for resisting the urge to take people up on their offer to toke up? (I'm never pressured into it, but it's like the dieter who's offered some chocolate cake — it's there, it looks sooo good, and the fact that other people are doing it makes it seem more "okay.")

Thanks so much.

— Baked or Bored

Answer

Dear Baked or Bored,

Hats off to you for taking control of your health and seeking strategies to make changes to your substance use. You acknowledge at the outset that your trip (pun intended) may be full of challenges, temptations, and other potholes that could slow you down or send you back to the starting line. The good news is that there are a number of strategies and resources that can help you limit your substance use in a way that feels right to you. Additionally, there are many ways to have fun that don't include alcohol or marijuana. You also don’t have to do it alone! It’s totally okay to make a few pit stops along the way and check in with a supportive friend, relative, or a professional to help you stay on course.

So, what is there to do besides watching movies and streaming TV? As you begin to reduce your substance use, take some time to reflect on what makes you feel happy and fulfilled socially, professionally, academically, or spiritually. This may help guide you towards activities that you’ll
enjoy, regardless of what you've had to drink.

When you find what you’re into, you might also invite your current group of friends to join you in some hang time sans substances. Getting involved in these types of activities may also pave the way to new friendships that don’t revolve around using substances. Here are some ideas you can enjoy solo or with friends and family:

- **Get your sweat on!** Work out at the gym, rent or borrow a bike, try a new group exercise class, or plan to get physical outside.
- **Soak up a bit of culture.** Visit museums, take a trip to a zoo or aquarium, or seek out some live music or theater (any of which may offer discounted admission for students).
- **Find your folks.** Try perusing websites like Meetup.com to find other people in your area that share your interests. Look around for organizations that work toward a cause in which you strongly believe, athletic groups, political campaigns, reading circles, writing and theatrical clubs, or student organizations. Or start your own!

There’s no need to force the fun — if you hate running with a passion and you think aquariums smell weird, that’s okay. Try thinking about the last few times you were really “in the zone” and totally immersed in what you were doing. Were you cooking or baking a complex recipe? Building something? Making art? Navigating an unfamiliar neighborhood? Seeing a performance by band you love? Re-organizing your closet?

You also mention wanting to hang out with certain friends who still use. By engaging in some pre-planning before a night out, you can think ahead about how much you want to consume (if at all) and how to politely decline offers of alcohol or marijuana that might come your way. Some responses (which don’t have to be true!) include:

"Thanks, but I'm cutting back for a while."

"Wish I could, but I have to wake up early tomorrow."

"I got really drunk/high last night/weekend so I’m taking it easy tonight"

"I can’t right now…my job/a job I’m applying to has mandatory drug testing."

"I don’t think it’s a good idea. I’m on antibiotics/not feeling 100 percent right now."

"I’m good for now. I’m already pretty drunk/high."

It may also help to let others know that you’ve set a personal limit for the night or have stopped using if you find that helps you stick to your plan. Asking for their support in trying to make these changes can also help you to achieve your goals. There are also activities you can do that may help you check in with your internal state and strengthen your resolve to limit your substance use. Learning yoga, meditation, mindfulness, and other relaxation techniques have helped many on the journey to improving mind-body health.

Lastly, it’s also worth mentioning that reducing any degree of psychological or physical dependence on substances takes time and can be achieved through measured reductions in use of, in your case, alcohol and marijuana. In addition to filling your time with other activities and
interests, you might consider speaking with a mental health professional or health care provider. They can help you define specific goals regarding your use, including how much you’d like to cut back and at what pace, which may make for a smoother ride.

Best of luck on the road to personal change!

Alice!
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