

## Celeste Clark: Mental health and substance misuse are an everyone problem

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Celeste Clark

We live in a world where people don't want to get involved if something isn't their problem. People don't want to talk about substance misuse and mental illness because they think it doesn't affect them if it's not an issue in their home. As we learned in Raymond this April, these issues impact everyone.

Substance misuse — from alcohol and marijuana, to street drugs like heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine, to the misuse of prescription drugs — plays a role in too many horrible incidents to ignore. We only hope these issues never erupt into a massive manhunt that shuts down a town and calls in law enforcement and news crews from across the state.

Make no mistake: substance misuse leads to pain, anguish, family despair, law enforcement frustration, an overwhelmed health care system, and unwanted death every single day. The problem is that no one wants to talk about it. People are sick of hearing about it, or they simply don't know what they can do to help.

The opioid crisis hit New Hampshire hard in 2016, but it had been manifesting through the pharmaceutical industry for more than a decade prior. Prevention coalitions were warning people of the dangers of medication misuse and addiction potential, but no one wanted to listen. People said it wasn't their problem. Some even said we were overreacting and making a big deal out of nothing.

When we raise awareness about the dangers and public impact of substance misuse, partners say they are busy with more important things. But have they considered how many of the challenges they face each day involve individuals struggling with these very issues? That substance misuse and mental health struggles often go hand in hand? That many people self-medicate with illegal drugs or the misuse of legal ones, including alcohol? And how much it costs every corner of society to deal with the destruction these issues bring upon individuals, families, and communities? We all pay the price — and prevention costs far less.

More than 40.3 million people in the United States have a substance misuse disorder. One in four people who use illicit drugs will develop an addiction. More than 70% of people who try an illegal drug before the age of 13 will develop an addiction to alcohol or drugs.

The people who struggle live in our communities, drive on our roads, and work alongside our children. They could be your coworker, spouse, child, or neighbor. So who pays the price? We all do. That sad reality played out in Raymond – resulting in the death of a person who had struggled with mental health and substance misuse from a young age, an officer who suffered a gunshot wound while protecting the public, a community that lived in fear for days, countless hours of emergency response, and a family who lost a loved one they had watched struggle for years. No one came out winning. It was everyone's problem.

New Hampshire is the Live Free or Die State, and some take that to a new level by promoting the use of mind-altering substances that affect the mental health of people of all ages. Our elected officials in Concord are currently reviewing bills that would restrict access to several unregulated intoxicating substances sold in gas stations and convenience stores throughout the state – including recreational nitrous oxide (**HB 1630**), kratom (**SB 557**), and hemp THC products (**SB 624**).

These products are marketed with false claims about their benefits and packaged in ways that appeal to children and young adults. This is how young people get introduced to a world of addiction. If access to these products concerns you, contact your representative – your voice, whether by email or phone, can make a difference.

There is also a bill (**SB 498**) to ensure that private insurance providers cover critical intervention services for young people struggling with mental health. Early intervention ensures children receive the right care at the right time, helping them grow into adults who are anchored, resilient, and capable of building lives of their own.

Prevention coalitions work on these issues because we care deeply about individuals – especially young people – growing up healthy, happy, and knowing how to enjoy life without the need for a mind-altering substance. New Hampshire is rich in outdoor activities and natural beauty. We need adults to be role models who encourage healthy choices.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and your voice matters. Talk about the dangers of intoxicating substances and the need for mental health services with your elected officials, neighbors, friends, and the young people in your life. In doing so, you are raising awareness, breaking down stigma, and helping make a difference. You could even help save a life.

If you are concerned about someone who is struggling, the NH Lifeline can be reached at **nh988.com** or 1-833-710-6477.

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