

Is your high getting you low?



In July 2009 the Victorian Government released a new campaign aimed at increasing awareness of the links between cannabis use and mental health for young people aged 15 – 19 years.

The campaign was based on evidence around the prevalence of cannabis use among young Victorians, and sought to build understanding among young Victorians of the risks to mental health associated with cannabis use.

The evidence:

- Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit substance among young people (14–19 years) and young adults (20–29 years),
- 1 in 3 Australians aged 14 years and older lifetime use
- The average age for first use for 12-19 year olds is now 14.9 years.

While the debate around cannabis and psychosis has been going for years, the campaign did not seek to communicate explicitly about links with psychosis. Instead, the campaign aimed to look at issues that were more relevant to a greater number of young people – the connections between smoking weed, motivation levels and mental wellbeing.

Three subgroups were targeted in the campaign – pre-experimental, cannabis users, and concerned friends.

Campaign Objectives:

- To link the use of cannabis to a range of low-level mental health problems relevant to the target audience.
- To encourage the target audience to consider their mental health and wellbeing and how their cannabis use affects it.
- To link the primary and secondary target audiences with information, resources and tools to assist them with quitting cannabis, reducing use and/or accessing services.

The planning and development:

Two phases of qualitative research were conducted to help better understand the target audiences' attitudes towards cannabis and mental health, and assess their responses to a number of short film ideas. Eight groups were conducted with users and non-users (15 – 16 and 18 – 19 year olds).

Key findings:

- Cannabis is seen as a 'safe' drug – many young people (users and nonusers) know people who use cannabis with seemingly few problems. As a result, when cannabis is depicted as a drug that will ruin your life, many young people do not identify with the messages.
- While it is not perceived as a dangerous drug – most cannabis users could relate well to stories about experiences with anxiety, paranoia and depression.
- The factual basis of the short films was popular with all groups.
- The realistic, personal stories of all the vignettes were well received – the information provided in these ads was more balanced and believable than most of the information that they would normally see in Government advertisements.

The campaign:

The campaign consisted of a number of elements, lead by an interactive youth specific website allowing engagement and interaction by young people.

www.highsnlows.com.au.

- Q+A series with health professionals,
- sharing stories,
- post comments,
- fact sheets,
- online survey,
- competitions,
- self assessment tool,
- four animated short films delivering stories around young people's experiences with cannabis and mental health.

The short films



Short film 1 'Ex User' - a young person reflecting on their cannabis use and how it has impacted on their health and wellbeing.



Short film 3 'Should I Shouldn't I' - a young person's deliberation on whether to use cannabis or not.



Short film 2 'Concerned Friend' – a young person's concerns about a friend who is using cannabis and how she helped.



Short film 4 'Regular User' - reflects on the effects of cannabis on motivation, anxiety and stress.



Campaign Promotion:

A mainstream advertising and PR approach was developed and implemented to raise awareness of the website, and encourage young people to engage with the campaign.

- Mainstream advertising and promotion – press and radio – youth oriented advertising and PR activities, online advertising,
- Radio competitions and editorial programs,
- A schools component – a series of lesson plans for year nine students.

Evaluation:

Research Activity	Description	Purpose
Benchmark survey	N=400 online survey among 15 – 24 year olds (metro and rural)	Obtain pre-launch benchmark of attitudes and awareness of cannabis and mental health (inc interventions)
Monthly tracking surveys	N=500 (150 per month)	Measure the success of communications after the launch of each new vignette (weeks 2 & 3)
Post campaign survey	N=500	Evaluate the success of the communications in delivering messages and impact on behaviour

The evaluation is expected to be available in December 2009.

A partnership approach:

The campaign was developed in close partnership with alcohol and drug, and youth mental health agencies. Initial discussions with Headspace and Orygen Youth Health helped shape the target audiences and key messages for the campaign. The consultations also identified the web as a critical tool in communicating with young people about health and wellbeing issues.

Close partnerships were critical in developing the materials for the campaign. The short films and accompanying resources were developed in close collaboration with Orygen Youth Health Melbourne, while the website highsnlows.com.au was developed and is being managed in partnership with the Australian Drug Foundation.

The Department has worked closely with a number of government and non-government organisations in the campaign implementation. These include the Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Office for Youth.

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