# 3rd Millennium CLASSROOMS

# 9 STRATEGIES FOR CHANGING THE WAY STUDENTS THINK ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE

Substance use among adolescents is not just a behavioral issue; it is a developmental, academic, and public health concern.

Young people today are growing up in a landscape shaped by social media, peer influence, and increasing access to alcohol, vaping products, and other substances. Because adolescent brains are still developing, they are especially susceptible to the short- and long-term consequences of these choices, including impaired decision-making, emotional dysregulation, and increased risk for dependency.

At the same time, we know that knowledge alone is not enough to change behavior. Adolescents make decisions within complex social, emotional, and environmental contexts. Their choices are influenced by how they perceive peer norms, how they manage stress, and what outcomes they expect from their actions.

Effective prevention and early intervention require more than just delivering facts or rules. They require approaches that support reflection, build internal motivation, and develop the practical skills needed to make safer, healthier decisions.

This guide outlines nine evidence-based strategies that educators, counselors, youth workers, and caregivers can use in everyday interactions with adolescents. Whether you are working one-on-one, in a classroom, or in a community setting, these strategies are designed to shift thinking, challenge misconceptions, and support positive behavior change.

## #1 CHALLENGE SOCIAL NORMS PERCEPTIONS

What students believe about "normal" behavior greatly influences their own choices. If they think most of their peers are binge drinking, they're more likely to do the same. But if they realize only a minority engage in these behaviors, their own behavior may change.

Many students mistakenly believe that "everyone is doing it." Social media and peer stories can reinforce this misperception, increasing the influence of peer pressure.

***Correcting these misunderstandings about peer behavior can reduce harmful choices and promote healthier decisions.***

### PRACTICAL STEPS

- Ask students what percentage of their peers they believe to be engaged in substance use
- Provide statistics on how many of their peers are actually engaging in substance use so they can see how their perceptions differ from reality.
- Discuss influential people who are not engaging in substance use

## #2 USE REFLECTION AND EVALUATION OF NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

Reflection is a powerful tool for connecting behavior with outcomes. It helps students understand the impact of their choices and empowers them to make better decisions moving forward.

### PRACTICAL STEPS

- Have students write or talk through the choices that led up to a specific situation.
- Ask them to "grade" their decisions (e.g., A–F).
- Have them identify alternative choices that could have led to better outcomes.
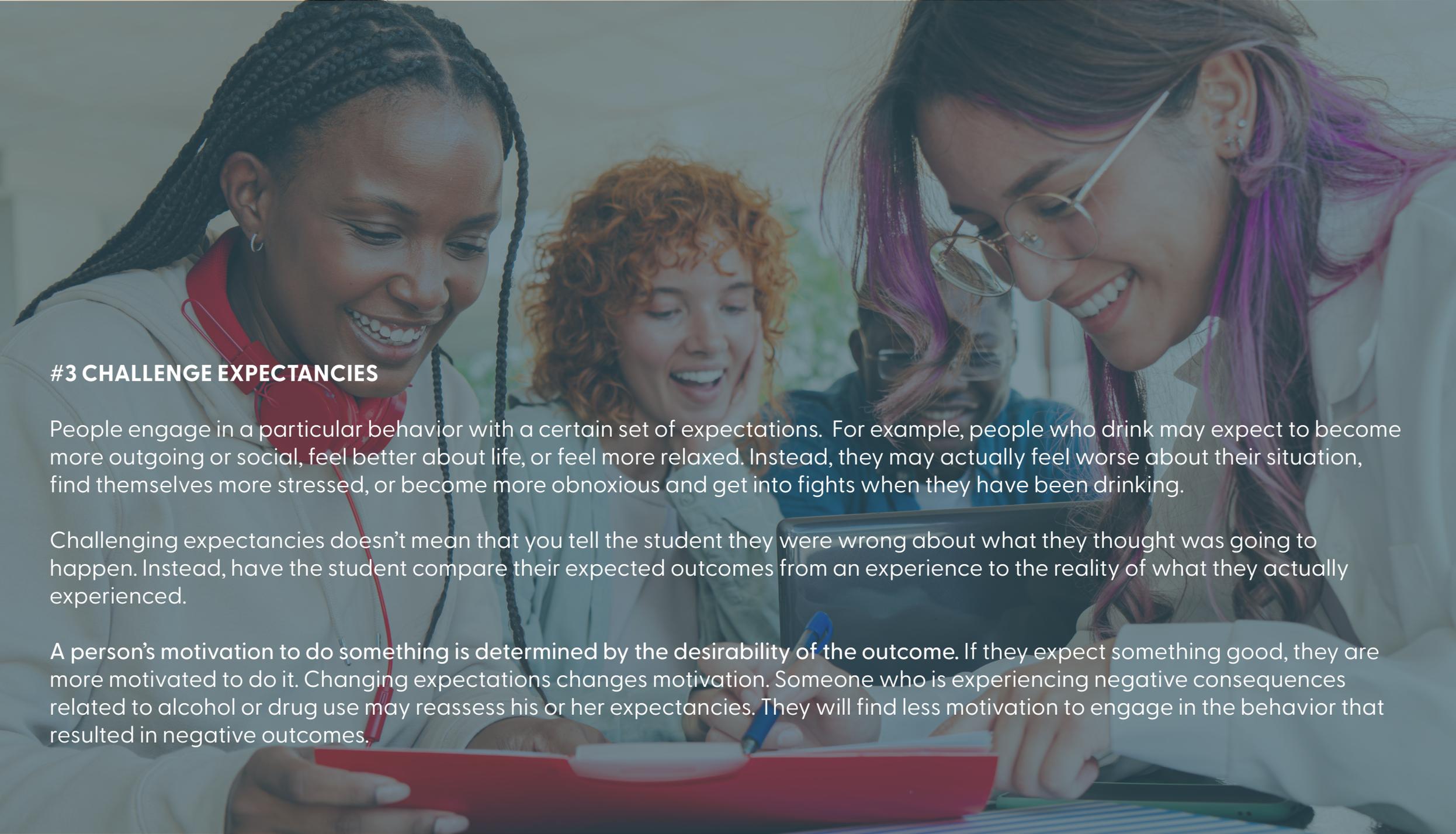
## #3 CHALLENGE EXPECTANCIES

People engage in a particular behavior with a certain set of expectations. For example, people who drink may expect to become more outgoing or social, feel better about life, or feel more relaxed. Instead, they may actually feel worse about their situation, find themselves more stressed, or become more obnoxious and get into fights when they have been drinking.

Challenging expectancies doesn't mean that you tell the student they were wrong about what they thought was going to happen. Instead, have the student compare their expected outcomes from an experience to the reality of what they actually experienced.

A person's motivation to do something is determined by the desirability of the outcome. If they expect something good, they are more motivated to do it. Changing expectations changes motivation. Someone who is experiencing negative consequences related to alcohol or drug use may reassess his or her expectancies. They will find less motivation to engage in the behavior that resulted in negative outcomes.

## #4 HIGHLIGHT MISPERCEPTIONS OF RISK

Risk perception is a measurement of how much of a risk someone thinks a certain behavior will have. **Individuals who believe that a behavior is low-risk are more likely to engage in that behavior.** Some students may not see behavior such as driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs as high-risk, because its consequences aren't always immediate.

To reassess misperceptions of risk, a student needs to become more aware of the negative outcomes of their unhealthy habits and behaviors. Making this association makes them much less likely to continue engaging in those behaviors.

### PRACTICAL STEPS
- Ask students how risky they think certain behaviors, like substance use, are
- Ask students to think about or even list the negative consequences they've experienced from substance use (for example, hangovers, fights, injuries, legal consequences, mental or physical symptoms, substance dependency)

## #5 USE MOTIVATIONAL FEEDBACK

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a goal-oriented, client-centered counseling style used to elicit behavior change. MI uses affirmations, reflection, open-ended questions, and summary statements to help clients to explore and resolve ambivalence (conflicting thoughts and desires).

Motivational Interviewing is based on the following assumptions:
- Ambivalence about substance use (and change) is normal and constitutes an important motivational obstacle in recovery.
- Ambivalence can be resolved by working with an individual's intrinsic motivations and values.
- An empathic, supportive, yet directive, counseling style provides conditions under which change can occur.

The first goal of Motivational Interviewing is to increase a person's motivation to change. This is done by asking questions about the consequences of certain actions or behaviors. Open-ended questions are best because they don't have a "right" or "wrong" answer and encourage the student to do more reflection and become more motivated to change.

The second goal is for the individual to make a commitment to change. This can be done by asking individuals about strategies they would be willing to try in order to make a change and setting concrete steps for change.

**PRACTICAL STEPS**
- Use open-ended questions to encourage students to reflect on their choices
- Encourage reflection on negative consequences they've experienced from substance use
- Ask them how important it is for them to make a change
- Regardless of their rating, ask them why they chose that level of importance.
    (As an example, if they rated importance as "a little" important, ask them why they said a "little" instead of "not at all"). You may not get them to move to "very important to make a change." That's OK. The goal is to move them closer to it, not get them there during the first conversation.
- Encourage students to identify strategies they would be willing to try in order to make a change in their behavior

## #6 IDENTIFY PROTECTIVE BEHAVIORS

Having students identify strategies that they would be comfortable using to "say no" gets them thinking about how they can respond in a situation where they may feel pressure to use. This strategy can move them toward making a change and feeling confident that they can choose differently when presented with a similar situation.

### PRACTICAL STEPS
- Talk about ways students can say "no" when faced with peer pressure
- Discuss proactive things that students can do:
    - Hang out with friends who don't use
    - Engage in different activities or learn a new skill
    - Remove substances from their home or backpack or locker
    - Tell others about the decision not to use
    - Keep busy so they don't get tempted
    - Excercise
    - Avoid situations where alcohol or drugs will be present
    - Create a list of things to do when bored
    - Identify triggers and make a plan for them
    - Hang out in places where substance use is not allowed

## #7 IDENTIFY TRIGGERS

Almost everyone has triggers that prompt bad decisions. **Self-evaluation and reflection is one way to identify a person's triggers.**

Triggers may be situational (i.e. having extra time, being with certain friends or peers). They may be stress-related (i.e. work or school deadline, having a fight). When students identify the things that are most likely to trigger them, or prompt them to make bad choices, they can then make a plan for how to handle the trigger in a different way.

### PRACTICAL STEPS
- Have students reflect on times when they were most likely to use or most tempted to use
- Have students write a list of "triggers"
- For each trigger, have them write at least one plan for how to handle the trigger in a different way (for example, if getting upset is a trigger to vape, they could plan to go to the gym and get all their anger out at the weight set instead of vaping)

## #8 HELP STUDENTS MAKE A PLAN

Reflecting on a person's choices and their outcomes, identifying the triggers that prompt bad choices, and choosing strategies that will help them stay out of trouble are all tools that young people can use to make a plan.

Making a plan is a proactive strategy that gives the student something to fall back on when faced with a similar situation. It allows them to think through a hard decision ahead of time, when the pressure isn't on.

### PRACTICAL STEPS

- Using the strategies of reflection and evaluation, identifying protective behaviors, and identifying triggers, have the students write down their plan.
- Have students think of various scenarios they have encountered or may encounter in the future. Write a plan of action for each of the situations.
- Make copies of the plan so they can reflect back on their plan when needed or encourage them to put their plan into an app on their phone.

## #9 PROVIDE SKILLS TRAINING

Making a change in behavior isn't just about motivation. Giving students the opportunity to practice their new skills in a safe and low-pressure environment is critical. This way they will not be testing them out for the first time in "real life."

### PRACTICAL STEPS

- Role- play peer pressure scenarios and refusal skills
- Practice decision-making in common high-risk situations.
- Use real or fictional scenarios based on the student's shown triggers and support them in choosing alternative actions.

## BONUS: PERSONALIZED FEEDBACK

Research clearly supports the use of personalized feedback in prevention and intervention programs. A review of 42 studies found that approaches combining motivational feedback, expectancy challenge, skills training, and personalized feedback were especially effective in reducing risky substance use behaviors (Walters & Neighbors, 2005).

Theoretical examples can be useful and beneficial in the right contexts, but when skills training and feedback are specific and relevant, they are much more likely to impact student thinking and behavior.

Many administrators are facing the consequences of risky student choices around alcohol, drugs, and relationships. At 3rd Millennium Classrooms, we create online courses that administrators can use to teach students how to make better decisions, so that their school can be safe and academically successful.

The strategies discussed in this guide are integrated throughout our courses, so that you can have an evidence-based tool for changing behavior on your campus. Because they are online, **personalization** features are built into the entire course, giving your students specific and relevant feedback that leads to real behavior change.

· Unhealthy habits and behaviors which are believed to be low-risk are **challenged by negative consequences** personally experienced by the student, such as hangovers, injuries, legal consequences, substance dependency, poisoning, and overdose. Our courses also help individuals think about **future consequences** of their behaviors. This allows them to continue to make informed decisions even after taking our courses.

· Perceptions of **peer usage** are compared to actual statistics of their peers' habits as a way for students to recognize their own misconceptions and to show that "not everyone is "doing it."

· Our alcohol and drug intervention courses cover a range of **protective strategies**, such as suggesting ways to set limits on use or ways to change a student's environment. Students answer questions about what they would feel comfortable doing and then receive personalized feedback on other ideas that fit into that type of strategy.

At the end of each course, students receive a personalized summary of their reasons for use, negative consequences, and a plan for change. Counselors can review these reports with students to support ongoing reflection and growth

To learn more about our classes, visit us at 3rdmil.com or call us at 888-810-7990.

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