

## **Teen Smoking: It's more than just peer pressure**

by *Wendy Reynolds*

There has been a flurry of activity and interest in the links between violence and the use of mood-altering drugs, including alcohol. The connections have been made clear in several research studies and a range of interventions have been developed to address the issue. The same cannot be said about tobacco. With a few notable exceptions (including the work of Lorraine Greaves at the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children in London, Ontario and the Winnipeg Women's Health Clinic), there has been less interest in the root causes of smoking and more emphasis on how-to-quit strategies. This may be changing through its Tobacco Demand Reduction Strategy, Health Canada has provided funding to a wide range of groups who are tackling the smoking issue from a variety of perspectives.

At AWARE (Action on Women's Addictions - Research and Education), our experience with young women indicates the complexity of both smoking uptake and smoking maintenance. Young women tell us they use cigarettes to cope with negative feelings and emotions, including those resulting from past or present abuse.

Young women also tell us about many other issues. They are conscious of the difficulty of growing up female in this world. One young woman said, "Women have so much more to deal with than men. They need some way to help them cope in a man's world, and cigarettes help." Body image and self-image are also paramount. It seems almost trite to comment on self-perception as it relates to young women, however, the young women themselves are very clear on its relationship to smoking. Repeatedly, we hear comments such as, "Smoking helps women keep a good shape and weight, and guys don't really care about that; girls are more nervous and worried about their figures."

In the past, prevention and cessation efforts have focused in large part on peer pressure. Our work indicates something different. Peer pressure may not be as important as people think. It may contribute to initial experimentation, but it does not necessarily lead to regular use. For some adolescents, an experiment with smoking remains just that. For those who do go on to smoke more regularly, the influence of peers can in fact be supportive. One 14-year-old told us, "I don't think peer pressure has a lot to do with it at our age. It's more of a problem when you're 10 or 11. Now I think my friends would support me if I tried to quit."

Complex problems demand complex solutions. There is no magic answer to preventing and stopping teen smoking. Contextual issues that affect the lives of young women must be taken into account when examining smoking intervention strategies. These factors include an acknowledgement of the sources of stress in young women's lives, such as abuse, violence, poverty and other forms of oppression. AWARE's work on teen smoking over the next year will continue to reflect this understanding. Resources developed through our SmokeScreen project will be available by March 1997. These resources will include Fact Pack: Five Hot Topics for Young Women, an in-school smoking intervention program and a how-to manual on support groups for young women with a smoking addiction. The results of the needs assessment for this project are now available from AWARE for \$6.50, including postage and handling.

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