

What I Wish I Had Known: Advice from a grieving mom

By Cindy Gresham

"I really do think I used to be a good person, but I turned myself into a drug addict, and I don't care how much people say you don't get addicted to weed, I definitely am." (Haley Gresham)



My name is Cindy, and I live in Michigan with my husband – and with the memory of our beautiful daughter-and only child, Haley. We chose to be open from the beginning that Haley took her own life at 15 years old on September 7, 2022. I cannot begin to tell you how this was the most shocking, horrifying, devastating thing of my life because my husband and I had absolutely NO clue she was struggling with anything. Doing something like this was the opposite of our daughter's character. She always sacrificed for others, and this was the exact opposite of that.

Haley and I were extremely close and talked about everything including smoking, drinking and suicide in age-appropriate conversations throughout the years. Haley told me everything going on in her and her friend's lives.

It took months to piece everything together, but we ultimately discovered that vaping marijuana played a significant role in our daughter's tragic passing. Our first clue was a goodbye letter from Haley, in which she wrote, "I really do think I used to be a good person, but I turned myself into a drug addict, and I don't care how much people say you don't get addicted to weed, I definitely am." This powerful statement was a turning point for us, prompting us to investigate marijuana further. Like many others, we believed the misconception that "it's just weed, it's natural and not addictive." We were so very wrong.

High potency THC products are very popular with our youth because they are being targeted by the pro-pot, addiction-for-profit industry. Today's marijuana is a different weed than what we grew up with and YES, today's weed IS addictive. Many kids have tried it or are using it regularly. You can't smell it, and the smoke disperses quickly making it easy to do in school and at home undetected.

Today's high-potency THC products are incredibly strong, as confirmed by Haley's toxicology report. Ongoing long-term testing continues to uncover and substantiate the dangers associated with today's products, highlighting their devastating impact on our youth. Our kids, unfortunately, are the guinea pigs as it will be a long time before we understand the full effects of these potent substances.

Now legal in many states, these products are easily accessible to youth. Concentrates, created by completely altering the substance, often in labs, can achieve THC levels up to 99%, a stark contrast to the 2-4% levels of the 1970s.

Kids' brains, which do not fully develop until around age 25, are particularly vulnerable to these high-potency products. Research shows that high THC levels can negatively affect brain development, leading to significant changes during adolescence including cognitive impairment such as psychosis; and can affect behavior, attention, and decision-making. THC overwhelms the brain's communication pathways, leading to unregulated and prolonged signals, potentially causing the brain to reduce cannabinoid targets, a mechanism linked to psychosis.

Haley expressed in her journal, "I hate how my brain works now." She sensed something was wrong with her brain function but feared that sharing her concerns would lead to her being committed to a psychiatric ward.

Putting all the pieces together, we realized our daughter suffered from anxiety. She was told by friends that vaping marijuana would help, that she could not become addicted and that it was natural and legal. This misinformation, being fed to our youth, was what prompted her belief that it would help with her anxiety- but the reality is that it created more anxiety, which then made her do it more, and she became addicted. It also created negative self-talk, low self-worth, and changed her thinking. It sent her into a depression where life felt overwhelming, and problems seemed bigger. It took the natural fears kids have growing up and made them into monsters until she felt hopeless, joyless and very, very alone. She did not understand what was going on and she hid it under a mask of laughter and happiness.

My advice to parents would be to not feel guilty about being a bit of a snoop. We found out Haley was vaping marijuana only about 4 weeks prior to her passing, yet she had been doing it regularly for a year. We had absolutely no clue, and I would NEVER have thought my daughter would do that. My message here is never think it can't happen to you. Educate yourself on today's high-potency THC products, understand how they differ from past forms, and learn to recognize even the most subtle signs of use. If you discover your child is using these products, be aware that they are highly addictive which makes cessation difficult and is often accompanied by withdrawal symptoms. Open conversations (without judgement) and a strong support system are crucial for recovery.

I founded Haley's Helpers, a 501(c)(3) non-profit advocating for youth mental health so that no family must experience what we have. Our mission includes educating and raising awareness about the dangers of today's high-potency THC products. You can support our mission by informing other parents about the risks and spreading the word on what you have learned.

Remember, knowledge truly is power!