

# Engaging Young People to Rethink Their Relationship with Cannabis Through Breaks

by Fred Muench, PhD

As Dry January for alcohol continues, one of the most compelling developments in today's cannabis use is the concept of a "tolerance break" or "t-break," a self-imposed period of abstinence from cannabis use. There are several important reasons why this is compelling. First is that young people do breaks already. Second, they do it because they feel they need a break. They recognize something is not going 100% right. Third, the research on Dry January shows that people change their use after taking a break, often reducing significantly.

As parents who have witnessed the consequences of heavy cannabis use, you know the cultural zeitgeist about use has changed. You know that as the landscape of cannabis use evolves, so must our approaches to understanding and addressing its impact on young people.

Despite the rise in CUD and related consequences, professional help-seeking remains low. Mennis and colleagues (2023) found that as cannabis use among young adults increased, treatment admissions declined. Some barriers to seeking treatment were the belief in one's ability to manage the problem independently and the larger cultural shift in perceiving regular and high-potency cannabis use as non-problematic. With this shift, we have to think about new models to support young people.

As we began studying treatment-seeking among young cannabis users, I realized they actually do want to change things about their use. However, they do not want formal treatment. That is clear: Over 90% of NSDUH respondents with CUD did not want formal treatment. The trope that most people don't get treatment is misleading. The majority don't want treatment. They are overwhelmed by the thought of "stopping forever" or dealing with ambivalence when they are getting short-term perceived benefits.

In our research, over 50% of the people wanting to take a break saw the benefits of using as equal or greater than the consequences of weed. Yet they still wanted to take a break. An antiquated model of engagement where we try to shove consequences

down their throats will not work with these young people who are already using and perceiving benefits. Do we need to talk about consequences? Of course! Just like we need to talk about benefits too because they are getting them. Yes, they are short-term, but they are real. Use happens for a reason.

Clear30 ([www.clear30.org](http://www.clear30.org)), a personalized mobile health intervention, builds on these insights, offering individuals a structured 30-day digital cannabis break. The program includes a brief assessment, personalized feedback on how to break, daily support messages, meditations, adaptive support, and a chatbot, all aimed at engaging users in a personalized behavior change process. We give people tools for a 30-day break and help them moderate or continue with abstinence after. During those 30 days, we have daily topics such as preparing for your break, dealing with withdrawal and craving, managing social networks, and more!

We are now testing a program for 16-17-year-olds which is a 30-day break, then abstinence focused but still trying to not push them away. If you would like your child to try this beta program, **use the QR code below** and follow the instructions exactly.

Overall, our data show that over 90% of our users are 18-25, about 43% want to reduce their use after a break, and 51% want to stop. In terms of outcomes, overall, 54.1% stopped entirely during their break, and there was over a 70% reduction in days used overall. Moreover, on the days that people used, there was a significant reduction in the amount they used. Just as important, 84% say they had improved mental clarity at the end of 30 days. Stay tuned for a paper coming out soon and click [here](#) for a paper led by the Recovery Research Institute on the baseline characteristics of our sample.

A cannabis break offers the opportunity for parents and siblings and others to ask the family member they are concerned about to take a pause. You are not asking them for a life-long commitment. You are asking them to please consider your relationship with them and to try something for one month. The key is an open conversation as you all know. What Clear30 adds is a tangible tool. It is something you can ask them to do while they are still in it.

Like always, we recommend if use is severe or there are emerging or serious mental health concerns to make sure to get professional help, even if your child is not interested in formal care. Clear30 is a stepping stone so young people can live intentionally and take a step back from use without feeling judgment or pressure, but it

is not a substitute for care when a higher level is needed. For more, go to [www.clear30.org](http://www.clear30.org).

**About the Author:** *Fred Muench, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with over 20 years of experience developing and implementing digital mental health and addiction interventions. He is the CEO of Clear30, a digital cannabis break and long-term support program designed for adolescents and young adults. He also serves as an Associate Professor at the Feinstein Institutes for Medical Research, where he focuses on developing, researching, and deploying innovative digital tools for mental health and substance use care. Previously, Fred was the President and CEO of the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, where he led the creation of the nation's largest digital support platform for families, spanning prevention, recovery, and peer-based services.*