

## No Joke: Comedian-Psychologist Promotes “Natural Highs” Over Substance Use

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Comedian and psychologist Matt Bellace talks about music’s effects on mood with Hank Chopra ’23.

EHS students gathered in Pendleton Hall yesterday for a night that mixed laughter with sobering science to deliver a strong message: intentionally pursuing a healthy lifestyle can make you feel better and happier than any drug.

The bearer of this message was guest speaker Dr. [Matt Bellace](#), a Ph.D. in clinical neuropsychology and a stand-up comic. His lively talk — part of the EHS [Counseling Center](#)’s Healthy Choices program — featured anecdotes from his teenage years, audience participation in funny stunts, and research illustrating the mental toxicity of substance abuse and, conversely, the benefits of a healthy lifestyle for the brain.

One key piece of his advice: Alcohol and drugs serve to fill a void when you don't feel good about yourself, so stick close to friends who find the good in you. "The No. 1 predictor of behavior, especially at this time of your lives, is the friends you surround yourself with," he said. "It's true when they say, 'You show me your friends, I'll show you your future.' "

Bellace mixed into his talk accounts of growing up with an older brother who used alcohol and drugs, and a mother desperate to keep him on the straight and narrow. He credited a summer leadership program with connecting him with solid, supportive friends. As a student at Bucknell University, he formed a club to promote "natural highs" that can result from exercise, sleep and quiet moments of reflection, and helping and caring for others. Bellace went on to write "[A Better High](#)," a book that outlines his argument for healthy living over substance abuse.

In his talk, Bellace said that research demonstrates that running for 30 minutes releases endorphins in the brain that are nearly identical in chemical structure to the active ingredient in marijuana. "If you run three or four times a week, your mood and memory improve, unlike if you use weed," he said.

Discussing how music can trigger different emotions, Bellace invited Hank Chopra '23 to the stage to listen to and talk about the effects of various songs, from Queen's "Under Pressure" to Adele's "Someone Like You." Hank said that when his grandmother passed away recently, music helped him through rough times. "Sitting alone in silence is really hard," he told the audience. "If you spend all of your day wallowing in something and constantly thinking about it, things get worse and worse."