

Speaker encourages Newtown Middle School students to get high in natural ways

By Chris Ruvo, correspondent | Posted: Wednesday, May 4, 2016 11:15 pm

Matt Bellace is high on life, and he's on a mission to help teens across America feel the same.

A comedian, author, youth motivational speaker and psychologist, Bellace brought his message about how teens can "get high" in safe, positive and natural ways to Newtown Middle School on Wednesday evening.

Through jokes, humorous anecdotes and a lot of audience participation, Bellace delivered the science behind why it's important for teens to stay sober and develop positive coping skills, while also providing practical strategies teens and parents can use to help today's youth grow into healthy adults.

"Young people need a lot of positive support to be healthy, happy and mentally (well-adjusted)," Bellace said.

For coping with stress and fatigue, Bellace shared a meditative breathing exercise. To demonstrate how effective it can be, he had the audience try the exercise for a few minutes — and then, as with much of his talk, shared a funny (and slightly gross, to the joy of the teens present) story to demonstrate the usefulness of the exercise in action.

One time he was on a plane and absolutely needed it to leave on time so he could make a connecting flight. However, a passenger's intestinal disquiet, to put it politely, led to a mess that compelled the flight to go back to the gate and be delayed. Passengers were in a rage. But Bellace did the breathing exercise and stayed calm.

Once the flight landed, other passengers continued to hoot and holler at airline staffers, but because he was calm and didn't let the situation stress him out, Bellace treated the staffers politely. That led to one of them giving him a free voucher for a hotel room.

"Everything ended up working out," said Bellace.



Psychologist and comedian Matt Bellace uses humor and audience interaction while discussing how "A Better High" can be a powerful tool that offers a positive way to talk about alcohol and drugs, and discuss wholesome ways to naturally "get high" every day during a presentation at Newtown Middle School on Wednesday, May 4, 2016. Bellace wrote a book in 2012 titled "A Better High."

During the talk, Bellace shared data from studies that showed how alcohol and marijuana abuse can have an especially negative impact on teens' developing brains, detracting from memory and IQ and escalating the propensity to engage in risky behavior.

Affects of teen drinking and drug use can have a lifetime impact on the brain, and the earlier teens start using, the greater the likelihood that they'll develop substance abuse problems, Bellace said.

Still, Bellace's talk wasn't about scaring teens and parents with stats; it was primarily focused on giving advice on how to deal with life's challenges and be happy naturally. Some of his tips included:

Teens should hang out with friends who live soberly, healthily and with integrity. Positive peer-to-peer support can be crucial to developing and reinforcing a good manner of living. "Show me your friends, and I'll show you your future," Bellace said.

Teens (and adults) should view setbacks and hard times as opportunities to learn and grow. Bellace discussed the example of how musicians frequently take painful experiences from their lives and channel them into compelling songs. "The most beautiful waves come from the biggest storms," said Bellace, a surfer.

Look outside yourself and look for ways to help someone else on a daily basis, Bellace advised. When you help someone, your body releases oxytocin, a hormone tied to feelings of positive connection, euphoria and love.

Create something tangible you can be proud of. Bellace used the example of a tree house he built for his young son. It was a daunting project, but the sense of empowerment and pride he felt in its completion had him on cloud nine. "You're not going to want to do drugs when you feel like that," he said.

Exercise. It improves brain function and releases chemicals in the body that make people feel better.

To parents: Model good behaviors that show natural highs in action and stay engaged with kids. If consequences are required, make them "quick and felt."

Wednesday's free event was hosted by the Council Rock Education Foundation and the Council Rock Coalition for Healthy Youth as part the Raising Great Kids Speaker Series. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Council Rock Educational Support Professionals Association sponsored Bellace's talk.