

ACHIEVE THE HIGH

Warning: Party games may be fatal

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Features Editor

You played it at sleepovers and fifth grade birthday parties, stuffing your mouth with marshmallows and struggling to yell "Chubby Bunny." At the time it was nothing but a party game. You popped in one marshmallow after another until the phrase came out diluted and broken, then spit them out, laughing.

It seemed childish and harmless at the time. The game, however, has resulted in at least two deaths from asphyxiation over the last seven years.

Now teenagers are experiencing a new wave of dangerous party games, most notably the "choking game," in which a person purposefully chokes himself to the point of unconsciousness to experience a type of euphoric high upon waking up.

No safe way

The choking game is often played in groups to prevent fatalities that occur when done alone. However, deaths have been known to occur in both situations, according to Kate Leonardi, founder of the Dangerous Behaviors Foundation, which aims to reduce occurrences of the choking game.

"There's no safe way to do it," Leonardi said. "Kids have

been injured and died playing in groups where they say it's safer."

For consumption only

Some games pose less of a fatality risk but still induce physical harm. These include the "spoonful of cinnamon," where the participant must ingest cinnamon in 60 seconds—nearly impossible, because the powder mixed with saliva coats the throat and, upon inhaling, burns the lungs.

Another challenge is to chug a gallon of milk in under an hour. Most people cannot handle the amount of lactose and liquid in their stomach and vomit because of it.

Not a sound substitute

The main question surrounding the deaths and continued participation in these games is 'why?' It is undisputed that these games pose detrimental consequences.

Many participants of the choking game are high-achieving teens who turn to the game instead of illegal substances, according to the Games Adolescents Shouldn't Play website, a not-for-profit association aimed at putting an end to the choking game.

The choking game destroys brain cells, can cause memory

loss, seizures, concussions, hemorrhages of the eye and can induce comas. Unconsciousness takes seconds, but when a participant is asphyxiated for three minutes, the central nervous system starts to fail which is shortly followed by death.

Senior Dominik Usakiewicz believes that the choking game is not a safe substitute to drugs.

"You basically have the same chance of killing yourself," Usakiewicz said.

There has also been a suggested link between reoccurring mental health problems, peer rejection and teens' participation in the choking game, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Spreading the word

The most dangerous element of the choking game is that kids think it's harmless, Leonardi said.

"The lack of education to the dangers of it leads children to think that it's safe to play in a group or on their own," Leonardi said.

The choking game and other dangerous activities are not integrated into state high school health courses, and many students are unaware of their effects.

Lose the game, lose your life

This summer, two north-west Chicago teens, Rebekah Toia, 15, and Angelina Ohanessian, 14, died after playing the choking game alone on separate occasions.

According to a 2008 CDC report, there have been approximately 82 choking game deaths in the United States from 1995-2007. However, the specific number of deaths is unknown because victims of the choking game are often mistaken for suicides.

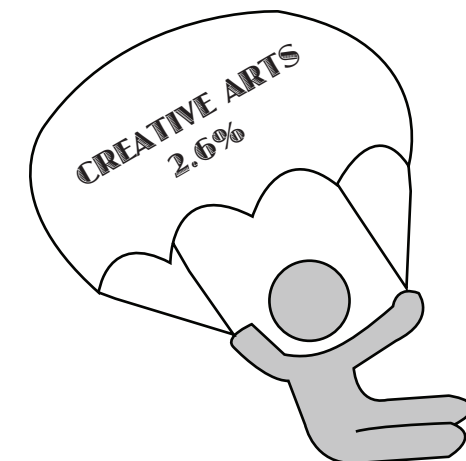
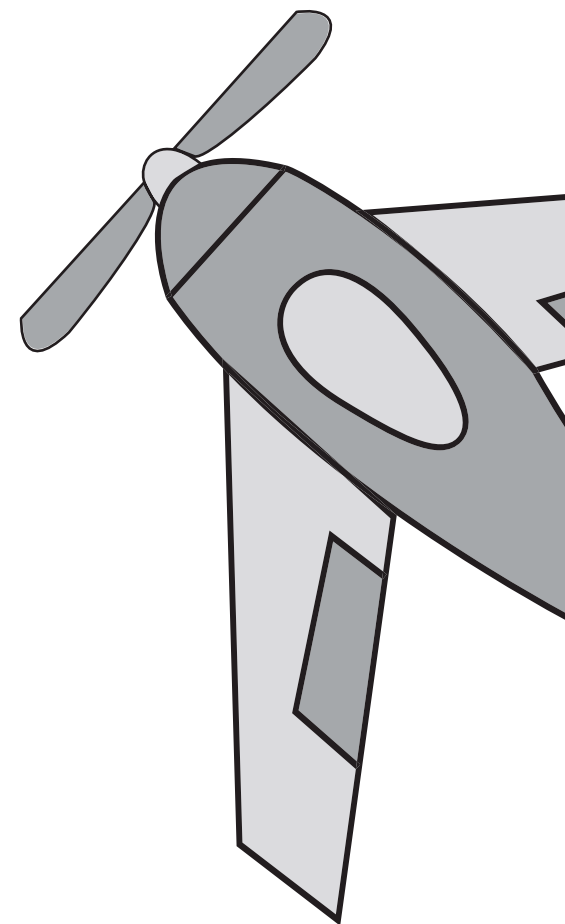
"There will be a death, and it might take months or years for the parents to realize the death of their child that was classified as a suicide really wasn't," Leonardi said.

The 2008 report showed that most of the fatalities were male. Eighty-seven percent of the 82 recorded deaths were boys.

Too big of a risk

The biggest focus for participants of these dangerous behaviors is the endgame—the euphoric feeling of being high. It's not worth the jeopardy teens are putting themselves into, Leonardi said.

"The buzz or the rush is a whole lot less significant than what they think," Leonardi said. "The risk for that payoff is not worth it."



What to do if your friend is participating in a dangerous activity

Situation of Concern

My friend has developed a carefree attitude about school, and his grades are dropping. What can I do?

My friend has been putting herself in danger recently, and I think she might need mental and/or physical help. What should I do?

What should I do if my friend acknowledges a problem but is afraid to talk about it with a parent or guardian?

My friend has been acting out of the ordinary lately. What are some signs that he may be using drugs?

Resource

Encourage your friend to talk. Listen to what he is saying as opposed to lecturing him about his decisions.

"Hopefully, the student has a good relationship her parents. If not, there is always a counselor, social worker or teacher willing to talk to her," social worker Kim Filian said.

Offer your friend a drug rehab center phone number or website. You can contact the Drug Rehab Center at (800)-501-9330 or www.drug-rehab-center-hotline.com.

"Whenever a regular pattern changes, such as eating, sleeping or friends, [this] could be a valid sign," social worker Gina Baddick said.

Compiled by Rachel Tenuta

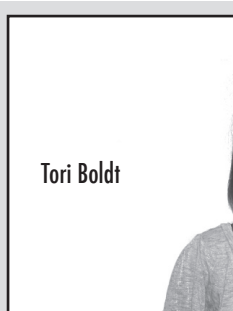
The crowd falls silent as the announcer calls my name. I walk slowly forward and climb a couple of steps. It's my turn. I reach my destination and slowly turn around. I back up and balance precariously, the soles of my feet stable, while my heels stand on nothing. I trust my body to stay strong and balanced. I breathe in and out once more and raise my arms.

My eyes zone in on a tiny, blue pin stuck deep in the wall, and after that, I'm in my own world, lost in concentration, focusing, focusing, focusing. I know there's a lot going on around me, but I can't pay attention to any of it.

I'm counting slowly to myself. Ready. Set. Go. All of a sudden, my body responds. My face contorts into what people call my "fish face." My knees bend, and I feel myself jump high. When I'm up in the air, I lose my sense of reality as the adrenaline quickly rushes through my body.

Diving is one of my ways to escape reality. When I'm diving, I don't have to worry about drama or tomorrow's math test. I only concentrate on the here and now. People whispering on the sides and the swimmers splashing in the water have no effect on me.

While I'm on the board, I am free from all the restrictions and distractions of life. If I am having a stressful day, I can just look forward to diving, because like other natural highs, diving gives me a chance to have fun and empty my thoughts. When I'm at the very peak of my dive,



Tori Boldt

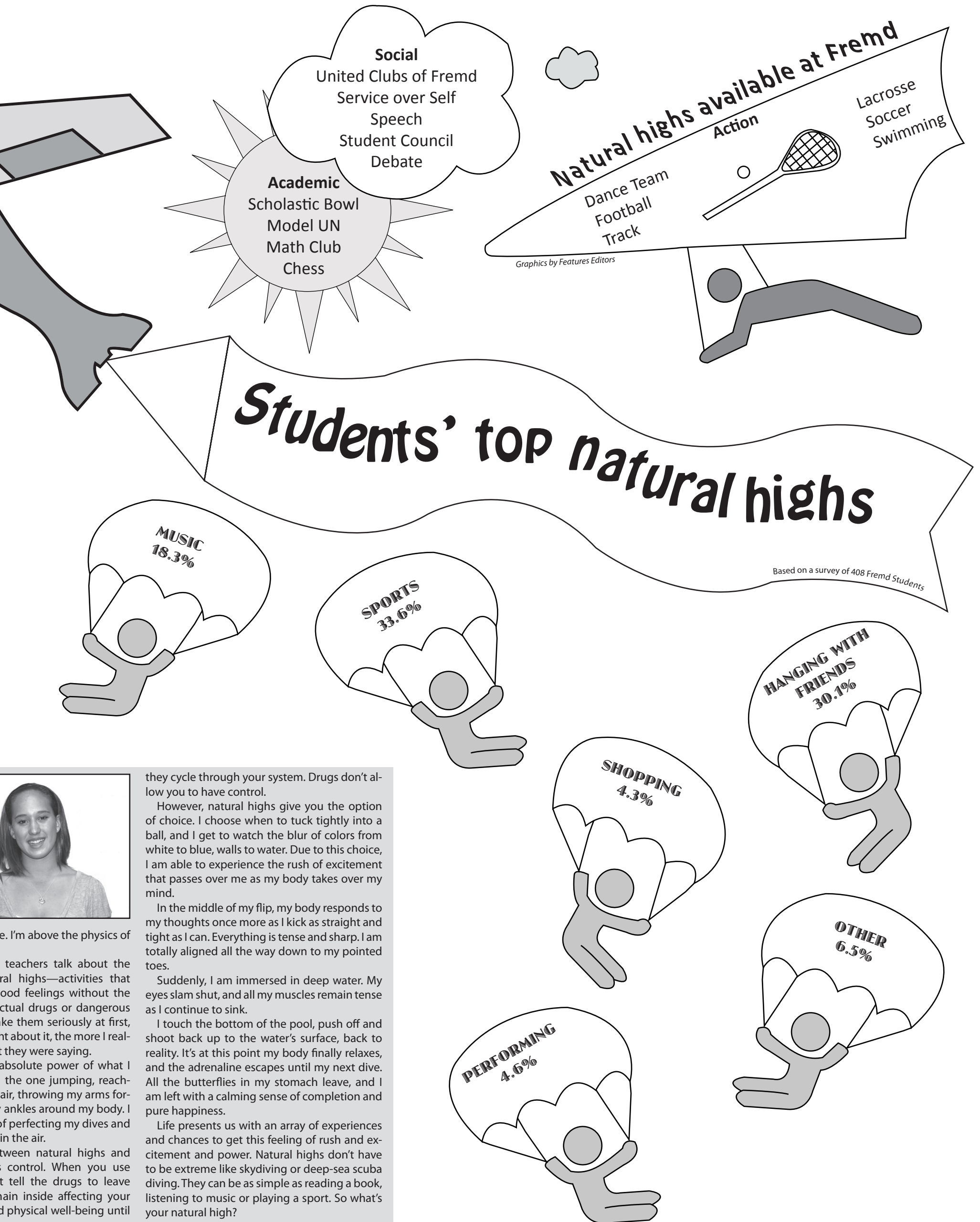
gravity can't touch my reality.

Every year, health importance of natural highs produce the same negative effects of a behavior. I did not take but the more I thought about it, the more I realized the truth in what I was doing.

As a diver, I have a different perspective on the board. I'm diving high up into the water and chasing my own dream like being in control of my own life.

The difference between natural highs from drugs is that with drugs, you can't just stop your body. They remove your thoughts, actions and

, AVOID THE RISKS



they cycle through your system. Drugs don't allow you to have control.

However, natural highs give you the option of choice. I choose when to tuck tightly into a ball, and I get to watch the blur of colors from white to blue, walls to water. Due to this choice, I am able to experience the rush of excitement that passes over me as my body takes over my mind.

In the middle of my flip, my body responds to my thoughts once more as I kick as straight and tight as I can. Everything is tense and sharp. I am totally aligned all the way down to my pointed toes.

Suddenly, I am immersed in deep water. My eyes slam shut, and all my muscles remain tense as I continue to sink.

I touch the bottom of the pool, push off and shoot back up to the water's surface, back to reality. It's at this point my body finally relaxes, and the adrenaline escapes until my next dive. All the butterflies in my stomach leave, and I am left with a calming sense of completion and pure happiness.

Life presents us with an array of experiences and chances to get this feeling of rush and excitement and power. Natural highs don't have to be extreme like skydiving or deep-sea scuba diving. They can be as simple as reading a book, listening to music or playing a sport. So what's your natural high?

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...teachers talk about the natural highs—activities that give you good feelings without the actual drugs or dangerous side effects. At first, I don't take them seriously, but the more I read about it, the more I realize they were saying. I have the absolute power of what I do. It's the one jumping, reaching for the air, throwing my arms forward, my ankles around my body. I am perfecting my dives and floating in the air.

...between natural highs and drugs. You have control. When you use drugs, you tell the drugs to leave your brain inside affecting your physical well-being until