

Dear Truth Initiative,

Depression is a hideous thing to suffer from. I know this from personal experience.

My childhood story is similar to those of the high risk young people you have focused on for years. Those of us who know poverty, abuse, broken homes, smoking parents, and mental illness have always had the highest rates of smoking. I started smoking when I was 10.

I thought I had safely locked the horrors of my youth away and then the fear and isolation of COVID hit. Like many people, my underlying and undiagnosed mental illness came brutally bursting to the surface. We're seeing an alarming rise in the rates of people suffering from depression and anxiety.<sup>(1)</sup> Most concerning to me is the rise in the number of kids facing the daunting reality of depression<sup>(2)</sup> and the rise in suicide attempts by young people.<sup>(3,4)</sup>

While most of you begin your day with the decision of what to wear, I force myself to get out of bed and find a reason to not want to die. Depression didn't announce itself, it just quietly grew and snuck up on me. Without seeing the danger of my thoughts, it became normal for me to start planning my death. Depression affects all aspects of my life. Somedays, I can barely function. I have good days, but life provides so many triggers and the depression keeps haunting me, ruling my life, robbing me of my ability to be happy. I'm not alone in my struggles with depression. There are millions of people facing the same challenge.

I was shocked the first time I saw your "Depression Sticks" campaign, then I became angry. How could anyone find it funny to create a parody about something as challenging as depression? Then I thought maybe you knew something I didn't know, so I went to your website. It was disappointing to learn you didn't have proof of your claims. I reached out to others who battle depression and shared your campaign with them. All of us are angry and disgusted.

Depression isn't a joke, it's a life threatening mental illness that causes death everyday. The lives of the young people you're trying to influence aren't a joke, either. Your campaign stigmatizes those of us battling depression. It lessens the public's perception of the severity of what we're facing.

Our kids are suffering. Their world has been turned upside down by COVID and many have lost all semblance of what was a normal life. They've become isolated and many lack enough support to deal with the anxiety they're going through. Their parents have had a rough time, too. The Depression Sticks campaign is a cruel way to add more fear to the lives of overwhelmed parents. How many parents are looking at a depressed teen and think if their kid stops vaping all the problems will go away? Now the media is picking up on this, spreading more fear and adding to the anxiety kids and their parents are feeling.

The last 2 years has shown me how easy it is to become depressed and plan my suicide. My fear is that a child will see your campaign and think their problems will be solved if they just put down their vape. If that child withdraws and dies from suicide, who's responsible for their death?

Please stop this hurtful campaign. Spend the money on programs to connect kids to each other and with positive role models. Educate them about depression, make sure they know the warning signs

and PLEASE make sure they know what resources are available when they need help. With a voice as powerful as yours, you could help children facing a mental health crisis. You could save lives by sending a better message to young people, maybe even the life of someone you love.

No one should die in isolation and despair, certainly not a kid battling depression that also vapes. They can't take the steps to save their life without first being given accurate information about the demon of depression they're confronting.

That child deserves the truth and TRUTH is the legacy you were built on.

Thank-you for your time,  
Skip Murray  
Brainerd, MN

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- (2) Racine N, McArthur BA, Cooke JE, Eirich R, Zhu J, Madigan S. Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During COVID-19: A Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2021;175(11):1142-1150. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2482
- (3) Yard E, Radhakrishnan L, Ballesteros MF, et al. Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12-25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 2019-May 2021. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2021;70:888-894. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7024e1>
- (4) Racine N, McArthur BA, Cooke JE, Eirich R, Zhu J, Madigan S. Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During COVID-19: A Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2021;175(11):1142-1150. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2482