

The Problem With Pot: Legalization, Growing Acceptance Increase Risk of Abuse

Andrew Carpentieri started smoking marijuana in ninth grade because his friends did and he wanted to be accepted. Like his peers in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., he considered pot to be harmless.

Yet marijuana propelled Carpentieri on a 25-year downward spiral of drug addiction. Soon after he started, the habit took over his life. Instead of doing homework and school activities, Carpentieri only wanted to smoke pot and play video games.

"All my attention went to getting high," Carpentieri recalls. "I became obsessed with where I could get my next sack of weed."

By 11th grade, the above-average student's grades had plummeted. He was suspended for smoking marijuana and never returned to school.

For Carpentieri, marijuana proved to be a gateway drug to more addictive substances, from alcohol to cocaine. Along with his user friends, he mixed marijuana with different mind-altering substances.

"Marijuana opened my mind to accept all forms of drugs," Carpentieri says. "I thought it was OK to experiment with other things."

Eventually he wound up hooked on crack cocaine for 13 years.

Carpentieri's plight is typical, according to Stuart

Holderness, a doctor and licensed drug counselor in Tulsa, Okla.

Holderness says marijuana becomes habit-forming for a lot of people. Those who continue to use it often find they lack motivation and deny how the drug is impacting them.

“It has the potential to become a higher priority than any other activity,” Holderness says. “It pushes out other things that are more important: work, family, relationships, even hygiene. They become dependent on it to feel OK—or to not feel horrible.”

Only 38 percent of Americans view marijuana as a gateway drug, according to Pew Research Center. But it clearly is, says Jack Smart, president of Teen Challenge USA in Ozark, Mo.

“Our experience at Teen Challenge is that marijuana is a gateway drug leading to harder and more damaging drugs,” Smart says. “Well over half our students indicate the first drug they really were involved with was marijuana.”

Growing Acceptance

Despite evidence to the contrary, more Americans are convinced that pot—which has been the most commonly abused illegal drug since the late 1960s—isn’t a problem.

In 1973, Oregon became the first state to make possession of an ounce or less of marijuana a misdemeanor; 16 other states have followed with similar decriminalization laws. In 1996, California became the first state to sanction medical marijuana, and 17 other states have gone along with that approach.

Physicians have the leeway to recommend marijuana as a treatment for patients of various illnesses from headaches to insomnia. Medical marijuana dispensaries are big business, dealing in products ranging from drug-laced brownies to infused lemonade.

Last November, voters in Washington and Colorado approved the legal possession of up to one ounce of marijuana for private recreational use for those 21 and older.

These liberalized laws have coincided with an evolution in individual beliefs. In 1969, just 12 percent of Americans favored legalizing pot, according to a Gallup poll. As recently as 2005, only one-third thought it should be lawful, Gallup reported.

Yet a Pew Research Center poll in April showed for the first time a majority of Americans—52 percent—supported pot legalization. Pew Research indicates 48 percent of Americans say they have tried marijuana, with 12 percent using in the past year.

With two states legalizing recreational marijuana already and 11 additional state legislatures currently contemplating legalizing pot either for medicinal or recreational use, drug abuse experts believe more people will become addicted. As happened with the legalization of once-stigmatized casino gambling, starting in the 1990s, lawmakers around the country may seek to tax marijuana in an effort to raise state revenue.

Annually, 660,000 people in the United States are arrested for marijuana possession. However, many people believe locking drug users behind bars is a waste of time. A Gallup poll last December found nearly two-thirds of Americans are against the federal government taking steps to enforce anti-marijuana laws.

The fact remains, marijuana use is illegal under federal law. Since 1970, marijuana has been classified under the Controlled Substances Act as a Schedule I drug, along with LSD and heroin. In January, a U.S. appeals court rejected a lawsuit to reclassify marijuana from its status as a dangerous drug with no accepted medical use.

Nevertheless, marijuana (or cannabis) is easier to obtain than

ever. Marijuana can be taken orally, mixed in food, or smoked in concentrated form as hashish. Primarily it is consumed by smoking in rolled cigarettes called joints.

A National Institutes of Health (NIH) survey earlier this year found a record low rate of eighth-graders (42 percent) consider marijuana dangerous.

“It’s a big lie to say marijuana is not harmful,” says Calvina Fay, executive director of Drug Free America Foundation in St. Petersburg, Fla. “We hear reports daily from parents whose kids have been harmed from this weed.”

Fay notes government agencies, including the NIH, Food and Drug Administration, and the Drug Enforcement Administration, all have published reports showing the addictive nature of marijuana.

Marijuana can stunt intellectual development, especially in adolescents. Studies show marijuana use is linked to the onset of mental illness among those who start using while young.

“To damage the brain with a drug that serves no useful purpose other than getting people high is very disturbing,” Fay says. “When the brain is harmed, sometimes it can’t be undone.”

“Marijuana actually has more potentially damaging chemicals to affect the lungs than a tobacco cigarette,” Smart says.

The amount of THC, the active ingredient in marijuana plants that is the primary cause of its high, has increased eightfold from a couple of generations ago.

Since the establishment of medical marijuana dispensaries, Fay says states have seen increased incidents of impaired driving, workplace accidents, and visits to emergency rooms due to pot use.

Youth Risks

“This is not about medicine,” Fay says. “This is the selfish

agenda of making drugs socially acceptable to get high—at the cost of our children.”

Further legalization will embolden an already entrenched black market to exploit youth in venues such as human trafficking, Fay predicts.

“The remaining market will be our children,” Fay says. “We are fooling ourselves if we think legalizing drugs is not going to be extremely detrimental to our children.”

Drug abuse experts are convinced the number of addicts will grow as more states legalize recreational and medical marijuana.

“Just as kids get into parents’ liquor cabinets or beer in the fridge, kids will sneak into their parents’ pot stash,” Smart says. “The government stamp of approval will only increase the number of people who have drug problems.”

“It cannot be legalized and kept out of the hands of children,” Fay says. “Tobacco, alcohol and prescription drugs are proof of this.”

Police officers are leery of making an arrest in states where marijuana has been legalized for recreational or medical reasons because it is difficult to prove excess. While most prescription drugs limit the number of pills allowed, Smart says marijuana prescriptions are open-ended.

Holderness says illegality does serve as a deterrent for many people who don’t want to risk arrest. With potential consequences removed, experimentation—especially among underage youth—certainly will increase. Likewise, those who already struggle with addiction may believe the risks for obtaining pot have disappeared.

“One of the rationales for legalizing marijuana is, ‘We’ve lost the war against drugs, so why keep it up,’ ” Smart says.

"We're not winning the war against poverty either, but nobody is suggesting we stop trying."

"If we're going to keep kids from using, we need to show kids that drugs are harmful," Fay says. "When kids perceive drugs to be risky, they are less likely to use."

Moral Objections

Dean Curry is pastor of Life Center (Assemblies of God) in Tacoma, Wash., one of the most liberal cities in one of America's most liberal states. He says there long has been a preponderance of local residents who view smoking marijuana as akin to having a glass of wine after dinner. Curry has addressed the issue from the pulpit.

"It's wonderful I can present truth to a community that at every opportunity has voted against any kind of restraint," Curry says. "It's a privilege to be able to talk to people who clearly and consistently say they don't want any restraint on our behavior."

Curry, invoking comparisons of past laws curbing the freedoms of African-Americans, has taken the opportunity to point out that just because something is legal doesn't necessarily make it moral.

"God's Law and God's love trump whatever legislation is going on outside these church doors," Curry says. "Public opinion is always a sloppy way to form your moral code because it changes all the time."

Instead, Curry points to Scripture, and asks congregants if they see anywhere in God's Word where followers are granted permission to relinquish control of their life to any substance. Curry says drugs promise peace, but don't deliver.

"People want to know what the moral problem is with this," Curry says. "The core issue is this: You're giving away the locus of control to something that is a counterfeit spirit."

Nationwide, only 32 percent of Americans believe smoking marijuana is morally wrong according to Pew Research, a substantial drop from half the population who thought so in 2006.

While Fay sees marijuana usage primarily as a health problem and public safety issue, she also acknowledges there are moral undertones. Some who smoke marijuana violate their moral beliefs because they act differently when their mind is impaired, for instance in letting their guard down sexually with a casual acquaintance.

A Way Out

For Andrew Carpentieri, drug use had implications for him as well as for his family. He says stressed-out relatives lost their jobs, finances and health trying to help him. Carpentieri says for two decades he manipulated his mother, and she enabled him. Ultimately, she cut off all ties with her son.

"I burned all my bridges; nobody would help me anymore," Carpentieri says. "Family members all changed their phone numbers."

Two years ago, Carpentieri graduated from Central Florida Teen Challenge in Sanford, and he now is the admissions counselor at the center. Carpentieri, 42, says giving up his will to Christ turned out to be the only way he could stop using drugs.

"I had always wanted to hold back a certain part of my life, and that was the problem," says Carpentieri, who earned his GED diploma and has reconciled with his mother. "Everything had to change. Christ wanted my whole life."

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