

Dr. John Gilbert Ph.D, CACIII
BOULDER ALCOHOL EDUCATION CENTER
1525 Spruce Street, #100 Boulder, CO 80302
Phone - 303.444.6142 Fax - 303.444.6177 boulderalcohol@gmail.com

Guest Editorial: "Smoke Two Joints and Call Me in the Morning"

"Drugs Are Us: #1 " A series of articles on alcohol and drug awareness

By John Gilbert Ph.D., CAC III, L.Psy. Dr. Gilbert has been treating substance abusers for 30 years and is the Director of the Boulder Alcohol Education Center Inc., outpatient evaluation and treatment in Boulder since 1982.

Apparently, the fingers are out of the dike and the floodgates are open. Well lit, clean, smooth running, and totally legal Marijuana dispensaries soon will be on every corner right next to the liquor stores and bars. The Right Wing's worst nightmare is about to come true. Our clear thinking leader has acknowledged that it's difficult to legislate peoples' personal consumption habits, even harder to control and enforce them. So, this wisdom goes, let's take the tax benefits and end the wars. If anything will take us out of our recession, it may be pot. Like it or not, whatever your politics, we will be openly living with pot from now on. Is it the legacy of the 60s? Was it inevitable? Is it that Aquarius Age thing? Everyday, the papers have articles about our new legal drug.

But marijuana is a drug. Maybe not as immediately lethal as others like alcohol, speed and opiates, but it is still a chemical added to the brain with many unhappy and very predictable effects on a person's thinking and mental abilities, emotional life and behavior. At BAEC, we're actually not too surprised that many people who use mind altering chemicals have very little knowledge of the actual effects these drugs have on their bodies and lives. Fortunately, the state of the science tells us that we know quite a lot about this, if nothing else, from years and years of observing the same patterns emerge in heavy, everyday users. We'd like to share some of the information we've gathered about pot over the next few articles.

Lesson 1: They don't call it dope for nothing.

In treatment, we encourage people to balance the pros and cons of subjecting their body to chemicals, and teach them to make choices, which are in their best interest. That means considering the down side of smoking weed and not only thinking about the high, the buzz or the oblivion. Where to start?

People become thoroughly dependent on pot, no matter who believes that it's not addictive. Marijuana is powerfully habituating; its use becomes compulsive, repetitive and tends to increase in the face of adverse consequences. Tolerance develops and users go through clear, identifiable withdrawal upon cessation. That is the definition of addiction. Does the shoe fit?

Pot is not addictive in the same way as other drugs such as opiates, stimulants, alcohol, etc. These are all different from each other, incidentally. There is no unified addiction pathway or addictive personality that's been found yet. All chemicals are different. Human tissue is the same, but each chemical acts differently, does damage differently and produces dependence differently. Ultimately, the chemical is stronger than the brain, and it always wins. All drugs do damage. Quantity, of course, does play a major role. There may be safe amounts of pot, just as there are "safe" amounts of alcohol for many people. However, there are no safe amounts of stimulants or opiates, for altogether different reasons. Before you race off to get that "medical" marijuana card, before you start singing, "Free at last, free at last, Thank God Almighty". . .read the next article.

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Drugs Are Us: # 2, Smoke Two Joints and Call Me in the Morning.

This article examines the effects of smoking marijuana on our thinking and intellect.

Perceptions and thinking: Does the scenery really change?

Obviously, it is our brains that change on pot, not the scenery. The way marijuana helps with severe pain, nausea, etc. is by dissociation from the body and from feelings, and altering the reactive thoughts about those feelings. It's a huge, and welcome, distraction. In some ways its actions are similar to the anti-depressants that we take, except that the Prozac's creates the dissociation to a much lesser and controlled extent. Pot seems to work on serotonin, as does Prozac, albeit in different ways. When we smoke pot, some mental functions are enhanced (those that help us survive, for instance) while others take a back seat, primarily to our complex thinking frontal cortex. Our body would rather send blood and nutrients to the lower brain and do without any meaningful thinking while it battles the chemical onslaught. The limbic emotional and impulse centers are now running your life. Therein lies the high.

Sensory perceptions do indeed become stronger and more colorful on pot. But in exchange, our memory, reasoning and information processing functions fade to useless. We stop attributing meaning to things around us and start seeing and hearing primarily the immediate stimuli in our environment. The music we're playing is suddenly enthralling, yet we can't track its patterns or differentiate the separate instruments. We can't catch the words very well (which is difficult to begin with). It's not that enjoying the music is a bad thing, but what we don't realize is that we're dropping hot ashes on the couch, or that the gas is on in the kitchen or that the baby has been crying for forty-five minutes. Ever go in the shower with your glasses or socks on? For someone in extreme pain, maybe this is helpful. For those of us who must function effectively in the world, though, pot is not a good drug (caffeine is much better).

In one way, our internal dialogue becomes stronger and more compelling under the influence of pot. But this is a fantasy, for it is actually impulse-driven thinking coming out of the lower brain, and it fails to help us discriminate what's going on around us. A friend of mine used to call it "not being able to tell what's coming at you." Since, while under the influence of pot, our consciousness is narrowed and trapped in the here and now, i.e. our couch and TV or stereo, we don't think about our duties, like studying for that test, feeding the fish or paying the bills. The great here and now may be interesting, even entrancing, but nothing useful gets done. Our thinking becomes passive and non-reacting. We don't accomplish much in the world while stoned on pot. For heavy daily users, this becomes a persistent lifestyle, even between smokes. Why bother to become a doctor when you can work the night shift at the motel desk and stay stoned?

One of the worst effects of pot is its crippling of short term memory. Can't remember why you went into the kitchen? Think about how much you need your memory and how much depends upon it. Your entire life. Do people often tell you that you already told them that story? And it's still not funny. Pot traps you inside your head. You lose the relationship, connection and associations to things outside of yourself (meditating is a healthier way to do this.) Marijuana-induced memory impairment is similar to dementia, and creates a sort of chemically induced Alzheimer's, greatly lessening our mental acuity and ability to think positively and purposefully. "Dope" is right: pleasantly euphoric and hungry, but significantly cognitively impaired. Will you be needing to use your brain today?

Next, we'll talk about Marijuana and your Emotions. Try to remember to read it. Make a note.

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Drugs Are Us: #3 “Smoke Two Joints and Call Me in the Morning.”

Emotional Effects of Marijuana: Pot separates you from your feelings as it dissociates your thinking from the meaningful world. Many people smoke dope to get in a better mood. We call this “self-medicating.” Angry? Anxious? Worried? Smoke a joint and forget your problems for a while. The problem, though, is that sometimes this doesn’t work and instead you feel extremely anxious, afraid and paranoid. Since our reasoning processes are now turned off, when a bad feeling comes along, we have no way to soothe ourselves or discern whether there is legitimately something to be anxious about. Appropriate feelings that are associated with real things and events become distorted, twisted and lost, especially since we can’t track, remember and organize our perceptions. This may have to do with pot’s actions on our serotonin system: first it suppresses serotonin, then later, when you get drowsy, it stimulates it. Less serotonin activity equals more agitation; more equals lower arousal.

During this artificial messing around with our brain, feelings get repressed or buried. This may temporarily feel like an improvement, but meanwhile we have lost the opportunity to act based on our emotions. Where do they go? We don’t just lose those feelings. They don’t just take off and fly away like angry butterflies. They stay in our body and when we don’t express them, act on them or soothe them by actively processing them, weird things happen. They are like unhappy energy that will find a distorted or twisted way out sooner or later. Between periods of being stoned, people often become irritable and let these emotional charges out in sideways bursts that now have little or nothing to do with what’s going on. Pot is a wet blanket over your emotions. Over time, we lose the ability to respond and react to our feelings, surroundings and life in general.

This becomes worse over time and a chronic problem. When pot heads finally stop smoking, these buried feelings, usually bad ones, come flooding out. Several weeks of anger, anxiety and depression are the result. This is withdrawal from marijuana. This powerful and agitated irritability is difficult to get through and the urge to smoke more to cool it off will be intense, but that only extends the withdrawal. Long term pot use makes people depressed. Add to this the responsibilities that we haven’t been taking care of, the things we haven’t been dealing with and the problems we’ve been neglecting, and you have a real mess on your hands.

The suppression of emotions becomes a habit in your neuronal circuitry which is learning that, “I guess he/she really doesn’t want to have any feelings.” After a while, it may occur to you that you no longer have much of a personality left, including that sense of humor where, in the beginning, everything seemed so hilarious. Heavy daily use of pot is guaranteed to produce depression and apathy (why bother?). No clear feelings equals no motivation. “I’ll just be a ski bum and bus tables the rest of my life.” It also creates impotence for the boys (by increasing estrogen and decreasing testosterone), messes with your sleep and dream cycles (can’t fall asleep, too busy in your brain; then can’t wake up and you forget about early morning appointments, classes, etc.) If you ever had an edge, it’ll be gone after smoking dope for a while.

In the next article, we’ll explore more of the physical and quality of life issues with marijuana.

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Drugs Are Us: #4 “Smoke Two Joints and Call Me in the Morning”

Your body and your life with marijuana: Who legitimately needs marijuana for debilitating medical reasons? The disconnect from your thinking, emotions and relationships that comes with regular pot use may have benefits for those in overwhelming pain or sickness, i.e. chemo, and may indeed be worth the price we pay for using it. Taking Marinol, the active cannabis ingredient in pill form, is a better option than smoking for those who really need it. Just being bored with your life, confused about where you're going, angry at your parents or partner, or disappointed in the way life's treating you are not medical reasons to smoke dope. What's your reason? Ask yourself, "what is it that I like about pot?" You are paying a high price for using it. Of course, the more you use, the higher the price. With regular use, you will become depressed, your memory will be offline, you will become less active, less directed, assertive and motivated to get ahead and pursue your goals and dreams. This is not the whole equation, however.

Marijuana smoke is loaded with gooey tars and carcinogens. It will coat your airways and lungs with a thick coat of sludge. Alcohol won't remove this, by the way. You'll be coughing a lot. Your mucous membranes become dried out and coated so that you'll be much more prone to infection, especially in your nose, throat and bronchial tubes (this is where we catch most bacteria anyway.) You'll be catching everything that comes along. That pale gray face, watery glassy baggy eyes, runny nose and persistent cough will be in the mirror every morning to greet you.

Since your respiratory system is gunked up, it has a much harder time absorbing oxygen. Then your heart and circulatory system have to work harder to get the needed air to the different parts of your body. Your blood vessels constrict and your nerve endings stop growing when you smoke. The whole body goes into a partial survival response and has to work harder to maintain life functions in the face of toxic chemicals being introduced. This uses up the body's reserves and energy to work on other things, like resisting disease. Pot suppresses your immune system and sharing pipes and joints will almost surely bring that infection to you, which you now are much less able to fight off.

The reduced oxygen and nutrients in blood also forces the brain to prioritize those functions that will be preserved and those that will be let go. The frontal cortex, your executive, complex, reflective brain, is sacrificed while blood flow to lower brain centers are stimulated to ensure that you'll survive the toxic attack. Hippocampal memory centers are inactivated. Higher order thinking centers become starved for oxygen and nutrients, so they hibernate. If you smoke enough, the effects can be very long lasting, possibly even, as some studies suggest, permanent.

Is the high worth it? Can you afford to be stoned all the time? Is your life really better on pot? Do you want to accomplish anything? Get ahead? Pursue your goals in a meaningful way? If so, pot won't help you. It will be an obstacle to your health, intelligent thinking, full emotional experience and ultimately your happiness and success. Think your kids don't notice? Think your parents and friends can't tell that something's wrong? Think again.

In upcoming articles, we'll take a look at other drugs, alcohol, uppers, downers, etc. If you have questions or would like to explore yours or someone else's use, call us at BAEC, 303 444 6142.

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Drugs Are Us: #5 “Driving that Train”

Stimulants: There are no old people who are speed freaks. Without question, stimulants are the most directly damaging and destructive group of drugs available today. They literally tear up your body and brain cells, destroy your immune system, strangle the cardio-vascular system, deplete the body's resources, and put your nervous system into a crash and burn crisis. They're tremendously addictive, and they scramble your thinking over time, creating a guaranteed delusional paranoia. On speed, you don't eat, you don't sleep and your life will be totally consumed in very short order. Even occasional use causes severe disruption and weakening of all your life functions. First, heavy users lose their ability to judge and reason; then their hair falls out, then their teeth and then they die. Think this is extreme? If you use any stimulant-- cocaine, crack, meth, ecstasy--you are somewhere on this deadly continuum, and this is the direction that the effects are taking. Speed kills like no other.

All stimulants work in the brain by preventing the reuptake of a very important neurotransmitter, dopamine. Dopamine is responsible for many emotional and pleasurable, as well as motor functions in the brain. Schizophrenics and Parkinson's victims are known to have insufficient amounts of dopamine. Some other drugs also work on dopamine, but not in the same way. Speed suspends extra dopamine in the synapses and becomes more available to the receptors. This gives us the temporarily empowering, concentrated, confident high. However, the brain can't recycle and preserve its supply of dopamine, so sure enough, we soon run out. We can't manufacture dopamine fast enough to offset the loss, and so what follows is an empty, crazy, miserably depressed feeling, with all organs under extreme stress and desperate for more speed as a shorter and shorter respite from the withdrawals.

Meth (methamphetamines) is probably the cheapest and strongest form of speed around, followed by the fashionable cocaine powder and its derivative, crack. Crack is probably the fastest addicting form. Ecstasy, for the folks who think it has magic or visionary properties, is about 90% meth. This gives the feeling of powerful confidence. Then a little psychedelic, like mescaline is added to give it that 'enlightened' perceptual edge. It is clearly a very pleasurable euphoria which lasts a while because it is eaten rather than snorted or smoked. People have Ecstasy ceremonies out in the woods, where they think they receive extra-normal, spiritual awakenings and commune with the universe. Sorry. Taking stimulants begins an ugly dying process that will quickly deteriorate all aspects of your life. You'll experience a very negative delusional paranoid psychosis before finding anything like wisdom or nirvana.

Some stimulants are prescribed, like Adderol, for Attention Deficit Disorder (hyperactive or not) and may be safe in very controlled amounts. The mental concentration effects of speed seem to help with short term specific focus, i.e. homework, tests, etc. Caffeine and white sugar (loaded in those new energy drinks) are also forms of speed, acting more like drugs than food, but are not nearly as strong. Other predictable symptoms of stimulant use are extreme agitation, irritability, anxiety, powerful depression interspersed with mania, perpetual colds and flu, high blood pressure, gastric distress, ulcers, much higher risk of stroke, heart attack, bad hair, bad teeth, bad complexion, bad breath, eye problems and suppression of appetite. Yes, speed is a regular picnic: so bring a shovel and start digging your own grave, while you still have the energy left to do so.