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Answers to the Most Frequently Asked Questions about Drug Abuse

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WHAT IS A DRUG?

A drug is a substance that has an effect upon the body or mind. This publication deals only with those drugs that have a potential for abuse because of their mind-altering capability.

WHAT IS DRUG DEPENDENCE?

Drug dependence is a state of psychological or physical dependence, or both, which results from chronic, periodic, or continuous use. Many kinds of drug dependence exist; they all have specific problems associated with them.

Not everyone who uses a mind-altering chemical becomes dependent upon it. Alcohol is one common example of this point. The majority of persons who drink do not harm themselves or those around them. However, more than five million Americans are dependent upon alcohol.

WHAT IS HABITUATION?

Habitation is the psychological desire to repeat the use of a drug intermittently or continuously because of emotional reasons. Escape from tension, dulling of reality, euphoria (being "high") are some of the reasons why drugs come to be used habitually.

WHAT IS ADDICTION?

Addiction is physical dependence upon a drug. Its scientific definition includes the development of tolerance and withdrawal. As a person develops tolerance he requires larger and larger amounts of the drug to produce the same effect. When use of the addicting drug is stopped abruptly, the period of withdrawal is characterized by such distressing symptoms as vomiting and convulsions. A compulsion to repeat the use of the addicting drug is understandable because the drug temporarily solves one's problems and keeps the withdrawal symptoms away.

Drugs other than narcotics can become addicting. Some people have acquired an addiction to sedatives and certain tranquilizers. Stimulants in very large doses are addictive.

Whether the person is physically addicted or abuses drugs for psychological reasons, he is dependent upon drugs. Drug dependence of any kind is a serious problem

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for the individual and society.

ARE ALL DRUGS HARMFUL?

Every drug is harmful when taken in excess. Some drugs can also be harmful if taken in dangerous combinations or by hypersensitive people in minute or ordinary amounts.

The fact that certain drugs can produce enormously beneficial results has produced the false notion that pills will solve all problems. Society must develop a new respect for all drugs. Drugs that affect the mind can have subtle or obvious side effects. These can be immediate or may become evident only after long, continuous use.

WHY ARE DRUGS BEING ABUSED THESE DAYS?

Drug abuse is not a new phenomenon. Varying forms of drug abuse have been present for years in the United States and other countries. There are many reasons for the current epidemic of drug misuse. Very broadly, drug abuse can be described as an effort by individuals to feel different than they do. Many drugs temporarily allow their users to evade frustrations, to lessen depression and feelings of alienation, or to escape from themselves. Such misuse of drugs, of course, does not produce any improvement in the problems of the individual or society. Rather, it is a flight from problems.

Some of the factors in the great "turn on" of recent years are:

- 1) The widespread belief that "medicine" can magically solve problems.
- 2) The numbers of young people who are dissatisfied or disillusioned, or who have lost faith in the prevailing social system.
- 3) The tendency of persons with psychological problems to seek easy solutions with chemicals.
- 4) The easy access to drugs of various sorts.
- 5) The development of an affluent society that can afford drugs.
- 6) The statements of proselytizers who proclaim the "goodness" of drugs.

WHAT IS MEANT BY A DRUG CULTURE?

A drug culture or subculture is a group of people whose lives are committed to drugs. The members of any subculture may congregate in a particular geographic area, such as Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco.

Marihuana is almost invariably smoked in such communities, but hallucinogens, sedatives, stimulants and narcotics are also used. It has been demonstrated that these subcultures are transient in nature; only a minority of the members remain for more than a year.

WHERE ARE MOST DRUG USERS LOCATED?

The location of users varies with the drug in question. Until recently, almost all heroin use was confined to males in urban ghettos. How this pattern is changing. A few young people in suburban areas use heroin. Marihuana formerly was seen primarily in disadvantaged areas, in certain Mexican-American communities, and in some groups of jazz musicians and similar persons. Today, marihuana smokers and users of hallucinogens are found among middle and upper class young people and other groups. Barbiturates and amphetamines were once abused primarily by middle and upper class adults. Now, many youngsters of all classes are misusing them. The important thing to keep in mind is that drug use patterns are changing rapidly in the United States.

WHY DO DEPENDENCY PRODUCING DRUGS HAVE SUCH A WIDE RANGE OF EFFECTS UPON DIFFERENT USERS?

The effects of mind-altering substances are related to the expectations of the user, the setting in which the use takes place, and the potency of the drug. Mind-altering substances can have vastly different effects upon different people because such drugs release individual underlying personality traits that are ordinarily covered up. Internal controls are diminished or eliminated; one person may become angry, another amorous, a third happy, others disoriented, confused, or depressed, and so on.

Even the same person taking the same dose of a drug on a subsequent occasion may have an entirely different response. As self-control is lost, the person reacts to suggestions from people around him and the setting in which the drug is taken. These factors can markedly alter the drug's effects.

DO DRUG ABUSERS TAKE MORE THAN ONE DRUG AT A TIME?

People who abuse one drug tend to take all sorts of drugs. Some of them say they are looking for a new "high." Some will take any drug to get outside themselves. Some play chemical roulette by taking everything, including unidentified pills.

WHAT ABOUT "PATENT MEDICINES"?

Certain over-the-counter medicines have been taken in excess and have been used to "turn on." Certain cough syrups and the stay-awake and go-to-sleep preparations are sold without prescription and may cause dependence. Paregoric (camphorated tincture of opium), which is available in some states without a prescription, is also being abused.

Another way in which patent medicines may contribute to the drug abuse problem is their manner of advertisement in the mass media. Children and adolescents hearing such commercials may become conditioned to believe that taking drugs for minor emotional difficulties is all right. To promote the belief that taking a drug will deal with the difficulties of everyday life is undesirable.

WHY DO SOME AFFLUENT PEOPLE BECOME INVOLVED IN DRUG USAGE?

At one time we thought that if we could eliminate poverty, drug abuse would fade away. This notion was obviously erroneous. In a world where changes are rapid and

yesterday's faiths and values may erode, affluence allows the time and finances to support drug excesses. Loss of goals and drive can be a by-product of affluence. When a person no longer needs to work in order to eat and clothe himself, he may develop problems of leisure. If he has no viable goals, no motivation or drive to create, to study or to help others, he may become bored or alienated, and vulnerable to the temptation of using chemical substitutes for productive living.

CAN THE EFFECTS OF DRUG ABUSE BE PASSED ON TO THE UNBORN?

Some babies born to heroin addicted mothers have shown withdrawal symptoms. Not enough is known about the genetic effects of other drugs. Taking drugs without careful medical supervision during pregnancy is extremely risky.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH TAKING ANY DRUG I WANT AS LONG AS I DO NOT HURT ANYONE ELSE BY DOING SO?

Society has duties to the individual, and the individual has certain responsibilities to the society in which he lives. A responsible social system provides its citizens with information about the dangers facing them, including the possible dangers of drugs. When a drug has both a harmful and a beneficial potential, regulations about the manner in which the drug is used should be formulated.

It is difficult for an individual to do something to himself that has consequences upon himself alone. Inevitably, the act will have an impact on those who are close to him and those who are dependent upon him. To "drop out" via drugs means that the person becomes dependent upon the social structure for a variety of services and supplies. Someone has to pay the bill.

WHERE DOES ONE GO IF HE IS BECOMING OR IS DEPENDENT UPON DRUGS?

If the user wants help, one's family, a friend, physician, or minister could be asked to help find the best resource in the community. The family doctor, mental health professionals, or school counselors should be among the first to be contacted. Some community self-help groups are effective. Many community mental health centers have special drug abuse units; all centers should be able to provide services or referral to an appropriate resource.

WHAT CAN A PARENT DO TO HELP A CHILD WHO IS ABUSING DANGEROUS DRUGS OR NARCOTICS?

Talk about it and try to understand why this behavior is taking place. Ideally, a relevant alternative to drug misuse can be figured out. Increased family interest and involvement in the child's daily activities will help. Professional advice may be desirable. Some communities have programs run by ex-users.

When the youngster is intent upon continuing his drug taking, the problem is much more difficult. Solutions must be individualized. In some instances, it may be desirable to point out that the family cannot be expected to support the drug-taking activity. Psychotherapy may be necessary, but it usually is not successful if the patient is resistant to change. Arbitrary restriction of the youngster may or may not work. If he runs away or is apprehended in some illegal act, he should know that the family will support and help him as soon as he decides to alter his destructive pattern of drug taking and antisocial behavior.

WHAT ARE THE BEST COUNSELING PROCEDURES TO USE FOR DRUG ABUSERS?

In general, the counselor whose approach is punitive is unlikely to succeed. Channels of communication must be opened, and the patient must acquire some measure of trust in the counselor. By listening to the drug abuser's story, the counselor should not give the impression that he is condoning the behavior because he is listening without judging. He must try to understand what the drug means to the patient, and then determine what non-drug alternatives are available.

Group therapy is often successful. Many treatment programs are very effectively using ex-abusers as part of their counseling staffs. Naturally, the skill of the therapist is an important element in achieving success, but the most important factor is the desire of the user to stop using.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO OBTAIN MEDICAL HELP WITHOUT INCURRING LEGAL PENALTIES?

A certified physician or psychologist can generally assure patients that discussion of drug abuse problems will be kept confidential. Practically all enforcement agencies cooperate with the person who wants help.

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE TO CURB THE MISUSE OF LEGALLY OBTAINED DRUGS?

The family medicine chest may be a source of initial drug trials by children. It should not be used as a stockpile of drugs that are no longer needed. Physicians and pharmacists must carefully watch the renewal of prescriptions of drugs that can cause dependence. The patient should be warned about using such drugs exactly as prescribed.

All manufacture, transportation and distribution of large quantities of drugs in legal commerce should be controlled by adequate safeguards. Large amounts of stimulants and sedatives are being diverted into illegal channels by theft and fraudulent orders.

WHAT SORT OF PROGRAM COULD MAKE A REAL IMPACT ON OUR DRUG ABUSE PROGRAM?

1. Society should judge adults who misuse liquor or drugs by the same standards it judges young people. A double standard produces a credibility gap.
2. Children should not be continually exposed to the idea that the stresses of daily life require chemical relief.
3. Factual information about drugs should be stressed rather than attempts to frighten people.
4. Respect for all chemicals, especially mind-altering chemicals, should be instilled in people at an early age.
5. Efforts to detect all manufacturers and large scale traffickers of illicit drugs should increase.
6. Further research in prevention, education and treatment techniques should be carried out.

WHAT CAN ONE DO TO HELP PREVENT THE SPREAD OF DRUG MISUSE?

There are a number of things an individual can do:

1. He can set a good example by not abusing drugs himself. Since he can expect his children to model their drug-taking behavior after his, he can either refrain from drinking socially accepted alcoholic beverages, or drink in moderation.

2. He can learn as many facts as possible about drugs so that he will understand the problem and be equipped to discuss it in a reasonable manner.

3. If he learns that someone is peddling drugs, he should notify the authorities. It is the responsibility of both the individual and the community to keep the dealers out.

4. He should do what he can to assist anyone wanting help for a drug problem while awaiting additional aid from a trained person or a treatment facility.

5. Most important of all, he can strive to meet the ideals of parenthood, trying to rear his children so that they are neither deprived of affection nor spoiled. He should have a set of realistic expectations for them. He should give his children responsibilities according to their capabilities, and not overprotect them from the difficulties they will encounter. A parent should be able to talk frankly to his children, and they to him.