

MARIJUANA ADDICTION
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A recent article in the Wall Street Journal reports on a growing trend: people seeking treatment for addiction to marijuana. About 16% of people entering substance abuse treatment programs in 2003 cited marijuana as their primary problem, as compared with just 7% ten years earlier.

The article also noted the recent publication of a new book called “Cannabis Dependence”, which contains the results of over two decades of research on whether marijuana is addictive. This research confirms what those of us who treat substance abuse problems have known for years: yes, marijuana can be addictive!

The studies show that **about 10% of those who try it will become addicted**. This puts marijuana at about the same addictive potential as alcohol – although, among daily marijuana users, the rate of addiction is significantly higher than among those who drink alcohol daily.

One of the likely explanations for the increase in people addicted to marijuana is that the potency of the drug has increased dramatically over the years. According to Dr. David Smith, Medical Director of the Haight Ashbury Clinic, the marijuana sold on the street today is about ten times stronger than what was available in 1967, when the Clinic was founded. Anyone who smoked pot back in the 70’s may have a hard time believing that marijuana is addictive, for the simple reason that the quality of the drug they used was far inferior to the quality today.

Another reason people may not view marijuana as addictive is that they don’t see marijuana use leading to the same serious consequences that drugs like cocaine and heroin, even alcohol, can cause: loss of jobs, relationships, health, even lives. However, it is not nearly as harmless as many people would have you believe.

In my practice, I have seen clients who use marijuana on a daily or near daily basis, and may not perceive they have a problem with it, yet they have come to counseling because they feel “stuck” in some aspect of their lives, and don’t know why: maybe their jobs or relationships aren’t going well, or they may feel anxious, stressed, or depressed for no obvious reason.

Often these vague feelings of dissatisfaction with their lives can be traced to the effects of the marijuana, and usually these clients are quite surprised to discover that, if they stop using it for awhile, the anxiety or depression is gone, replaced by a renewed energy and sense of purpose.

Other clients have been surprised to find out how difficult it is for them to stop using, as they experience the effects of withdrawal: increased irritability and anxiousness; difficulty sleeping, relaxing or concentrating; as well as headaches or other physical aches and pains. Many people are also surprised to learn how strong the cravings for the drug can be, and for how long the cravings may persist – all signs that yes indeed, they had become addicted.

If you are concerned that you or someone you care about may have a marijuana addiction, you can call the Substance Abuse Treatment Hotline at (800) 662-HELP, look into joining a support group (www.marijuana-anonymous.org), or contact me for more information.