

DRUGS AND "U"

Drugs



Very often, when we hear the term “drug”, we think of illegal or illicit drugs. We think of the heroin addict, the person who snorts cocaine, the use of meth or ecstasy, and even marijuana use. Another use of the term “drug” is in the context of a “drug store”, often called the pharmacy; this is a location where we get prescriptions filled, or where we purchase over-the-counter medicines. Whatever the setting – purchasing a substance from a dealer or a friend, or buying a drug from the local store – each of these represents drug use. Similarly, each of these can represent drug abuse.

The aim of this article is to promote healthy and informed choices; what is important is to have safe and appropriate decisions that are in the best interests of each individual. Since drugs surround us, it is important that we have good information for our decisions. We also benefit from some healthy perspectives. This section highlights five main points regarding drugs and drug abuse, highlighting major themes that can serve as a foundation for more informed decisions.

The first point is that the human body responds or reacts to the presence of substances that are taken in. These substances can enter the body in a variety of ways – eating, inhalation, injection, and other processes. When a drug enters the human body, the body reacts. It doesn’t matter whether the drug is legal or illegal, or whether the drug was prescribed or used for self-medication. The critical message is that various types of effects can occur – some are ‘threshold’ effects, the minimal effect when the drug is taken. Sometimes the effects are the desired effects (called “therapeutic effects” for medical uses). There may be side effects, even with a therapeutic dose; these are often unwanted effects. Further, there can be an overdose with too much of a drug for the body, where the body has strong negative reactions. Finally, there can be toxic effects; again, these can happen with legal as well as illegal drugs. The central point is



that the body is very delicate, and a wide range of reactions can occur with drugs that are taken. Much of this variability depends upon the drug, as much depends upon the specific characteristics of the user (see the third point below for more on this).

Second, for most of us, drugs are a part of life. Said differently, most adults use drugs intentionally on a periodic or regular basis, and, most of the time, this is for medicinal purposes like treating a condition or alleviating some problematic symptoms. This is not to say that drug abuse is a part of life, but to acknowledge the reality that most people have experience with drugs. The important message here is that we seek to avoid the abuse or misuse of drugs. We seek the desired consequences, and want to eliminate or reduce the undesired, more harmful results. Taking a drug for medicinal purposes has numerous advantages, such as quality control and the medical guidance that comes from the doctor, the pharmacist, and/or the packaging information included. Taking a drug for recreational purposes does not have these foundations; this is particularly the case with illicit or illegal drugs, but can also be the case with prescription or over-the-counter drugs used for non-medicinal purposes or in a non-prescribed way. In short, the body does not know why a person is taking a substance; the body responds to whatever is put in it. The caution is to reduce or eliminate drug abuse, and to promote responsible decisions about using drugs.

The third theme is that individuals have different responses to drugs; generally, seven principles define the effects of drugs on an individual. The primary factor determining a drug's effects are the properties of the drug. The specific drug used is the primary determinant of effects, based on general category as well as specific properties of the drug itself. Overall, drugs are typically classified in various categories (such as stimulant, sedative-hypnotic, hallucinogen, narcotic), with drugs within a category acting more like one another than drugs in another category. Changes in a drug's constitution typically affect the results, including the overall therapeutic effect as well as the side effects. Second, the characteristics of the individual are determining factors; these include weight, gender, previous experience, presence of other drugs in the body, expectations, mood, age, and related factors. Since no two individuals are alike, a person's individual characteristics affect the responses to the use of a drug. Third, the context of use makes a difference regarding a drug's effects; these include whether the drug is taken in a group setting or alone, whether there are concerns with enforcement of laws, whether a party scene or other setting is present and similar factors. The fourth factor includes the dosage; the more of a drug a person takes, the greater the reaction will be. This does not mean that more of a therapeutic dose is helpful; in fact, that greater quantity could result in an overdose. The means of preparation and method of



use are the next two factors; these go hand-in-hand, as how the drug is prepared can facilitate its use in different ways. For example, preparing a substance as a fine powder can make it accessible for snorting, and getting a drug ready for smoking may have its preparation as a leafy substance. Finally, the more natural a drug is, generally, the less potent it is; when a drug is processed so that the 'active ingredient' is more concentrated, the drug will be more potent. These seven themes are helpful in understanding the overall effects of drugs on any one individual.

The fourth major theme has to do with an understanding of dependence. The use of drugs, whether legal or illegal, licit or illicit, and for medicinal or recreational use, can result in short-term effects as well as longer-term effects. The longer-term results are often called 'dependence', and may be cited as 'addiction.' This is when the person is pre-occupied with the use of drugs, and may be involved with factors such as compulsive use, increased tolerance, and numerous negative consequences associated with the drug's use. This is important to note because of two factors: first, dependence is something that we seek to avoid, because it means that the user has 'lost control' of his/her decisions about the drug's use; and second, many drug users may not be dependent but still have problems with the use of the drug, such as negative consequences, overdose, or death. Just because dependence is not present does not mean that the use of a drug is acceptable, safe, or healthy.

The last consideration has to do with maximizing the acquisition of good information for you and for others. Just as with alcohol and tobacco, the importance of accurate, current, and helpful information about drugs is vital so that you can maintain healthy and safe behavior. Getting good information is important, so that you are fully aware of the facts surrounding any substance that you or others may be taking. The important factor here is that you have the ultimate responsibility for yourself and for what you put in your body.

In short, this essay provides a very brief overview about drugs and the human body. This is a straightforward and concise overview about several of the key factors to take into consideration when thinking about drug use. Again, 'drug use' has to do with medicinal as well as recreational use; the principles are the same, and the five themes cited in this essay are consistent across the wide range of drugs that exist in our culture. The main theme through all of this is one of personal responsibility – for you and for those around you. You are the ultimate decision-maker for yourself, and you can help influence those around you with their decisions. By your exposure to these concepts



and themes, and with your acquisition of quality information, you can help promote more responsible choices. These choices will lead, ultimately, to lives that are healthier, safer, and filled with heightened potential.

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