

Let's talk about...

# Illegal Drug Use

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

**DRUGS ARE NOT DANGEROUS BECAUSE THEY ARE ILLEGAL; DRUGS ARE ILLEGAL BECAUSE DRUGS ARE DANGEROUS. ILLICIT OR STREET DRUGS COME WITH THEIR OWN SPECIAL SET OF RISKS. YET DESPITE THE DANGER, PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE, FROM THE BOARDROOM, TO THE MOVIE SET, TO PEOPLE LIVING ON THE STREETS, TAKE ILLEGAL DRUGS SUCH AS MARIJUANA, COCAINE, HEROIN, ECSTASY, LSD, AND CRYSTAL METH. IF YOU TAKE ILLEGAL DRUGS, EVEN IF ONLY VERY OCCASIONALLY, BE AWARE THAT YOU ARE RISKING YOUR LIFE.**

**When you buy drugs on the street, you can never know exactly what you are taking.** Dealers may not know (or reveal) exactly what they are selling. Often one drug is sold in place of another. It is estimated that at least one in every three times a drug is bought on the street that it is not what the buyer thought it was. You also have no way of knowing the exact potency of what you are buying. Street drugs are frequently laced with other drugs or chemicals (such as strychnine) which can be harmful.

Many prescription drugs are commonly sold as street drugs. These street drugs are often 'look-alikes,' created in clandestine labs and may contain other drugs or substances.

Serious drug reactions, including fatal overdoses, are usually caused by users' ignorance of exactly what drug and how much of it they are taking. As well, people who regularly use drugs illegally, particularly people who inject drugs, are at increased risk for a range of health, legal, and social problems.

## **A WORD ABOUT MARIJUANA**

Many people today smoke marijuana believing it is relatively harmless. In fact cannabis (marijuana, hash, hashish oil) is the most widely used illegal drug in Canada with almost half of all adult Canadians saying they've used it at some time in their lives. About 15% of the population currently uses it. But they do so at their own peril.

In recent years, new growing methods have produced cannabis with increasingly higher levels of THC – the active ingredient. Cannabis use impairs perception, judgment, balance, motor co-ordination and reaction times. It makes driving or operating machinery

particularly dangerous and the effects can last up to 24 hours. Memory, attention span, and learning are impaired while the user is intoxicated, and with prolonged use these effects can last long after the person has stopped using.

Regular heavy users of cannabis develop tolerance and long-term use can cause dependence. The user experiences cravings for the mood-altering effects of the drug, and withdrawal occurs if drug use is abruptly stopped. Heavy use can lead to anxiety, personality disturbances, depression and trigger psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia. Although not as severe, the tolerance and dependence caused by heavy cannabis use are similar to those caused by heavy alcohol use. Heavy users often require detoxification and treatment to overcome their dependence.

## **DRUG ADDICTION**

Many people start to use illicit drugs on an occasional basis because they like the way it makes them feel. They believe there is no harm done if drugs are taken for recreational purposes and that they won't become addicted. Before long, however, they start using more and more of the drug to experience the same high and to cope with life's problems. Before they know it they are hooked and feel that can't live without their drug. This is because the drug physically changes the brain's wiring, creating a chronic brain disorder characterized by compulsive drug-seeking behaviors.

When drugs are involved, the first step to making a change usually occurs after you become aware that your life has become unmanageable in some way. It doesn't matter how you got here, what's important is that you're looking for answers to deal with your current circumstances. There is no magic pill that will cure drug dependency, but learning new ways of coping and having a strong support system can make all the difference in the world. Once you find new ways of managing your problems, without the use of drugs, the tight grip addiction has on your life will begin to loosen its hold over you. Recovery is possible with the right medical help and social support.

## **TREATMENT**

Today, the majority of substance abuse professionals treat drug addiction like a disease. A good treatment program generally includes a multi-disciplinary approach. It will also ensure a continuing care program is put into place to help prevent relapse. Some people do manage to quit drugs using will-power alone, but unless the illness has been properly treated, chances are good they will start using drugs again.

To learn more about how to treat drug abuse, contact your EFAP, a local Drug and Alcohol Agency, or a support program like Narcotics Anonymous.



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