



Discussion - Marijuana and the Three Paths:

When someone starts using marijuana regularly in their youth, there are three common outcomes later in life:



The Three Paths Explained:

Path 1 – “The Phase” - Some individuals use marijuana for a time period starting some time in their youth, perhaps then using for many years afterward but then they **eventually just stop on their own**. Marijuana use in this case was just a *phase* that started and one day and then ended after the passage of time. Some people smoke weed as a young person and simply “grow out of it” one day.

Path 2 – “The Lifetime User” – There are other people who start using marijuana in their youth who become lifetime marijuana users to varying degrees but never become seriously involved with other “harder” drugs. The degree to which ongoing marijuana use effects a lifetime user can vary from individual to individual however the people who end up on this path do not later find themselves addicted to drugs like cocaine, heroin or prescription drugs in spite of staying with marijuana use on a long-term to lifelong basis.

Path 3 – “The Gateway” – Finally, there are those individuals who start at first using marijuana who eventually develop some form of lasting dependency and prolonged tolerance. In this case the “high” associated with marijuana may one day not produce the desired effect, thus triggering a person on this path to seek other highs with more severe substances. Many people who are addicted to heroin and other “hard” drugs can testify to the experience of using marijuana for many years but eventually moving on to other things with time.



***Discussion Questions** (*Counselors, keep in mind, if using this worksheet going forward with adolescents, it may be more effective to use this information as a guided discussion rather than handing out copies of the following information directly to the group as it may be overwhelming for teens, especially if a lot of the group members are newly clean or still using)

Talking about Path 1 “The Phase” – Do you personally know anyone (or at least know of anyone) who smoked marijuana for a time period in their youth, who one day grew out of it and stopped later as an adult?

- What factors may have been involved in that person’s decision to stop smoking weed? (For example, getting a good job, having children or other responsibilities, moving on from negative peer group, or other factors?)

Talking about Path 2 “Lifetime Use” – Many young (and older) weed smokers may like to talk about lifetime marijuana users who still appear to be very successful in life. (For example – “My friend’s father smokes weed and he is the vice president of a huge company” or “Look at this music (or sports) star, he smokes weed and he is rich and famous”)

- For every one “successful” lifetime marijuana smoker, how many more lifetime marijuana smokers end up failing to live up to their potential? (For example, for every chronic weed smoker who graduates college, how many more drop out? or: For every marijuana smoker with a really good job, how many more work low paying, dead end jobs or are unemployed. Or, one more: For every daily weed smoker who owns a large house, how many more still live home with their parents into their 30’s or 40’s)
- Has anyone ever heard of **amotivational syndrome**? Discuss the following definition:
 - **Amotivational syndrome** is a psychological condition associated with diminished inspiration to participate in social situations and activities, with episodes of apathy caused by an external event, situation, [or] substance (Wikipedia). In the case of marijuana and amotivational syndrome, this would happen when someone smokes weed and they stop wanting to do things and end up sitting around the house a lot maybe talking about doing things, but actually not really getting out and doing them
 - Do you know of anyone personally who may be exhibiting **amotivational syndrome** because they smoke too much weed? (In other words, a person who gets high all the time and never really wants to do much else? Most regular marijuana using young people know someone who fits this description
- There is research showing that regular marijuana use impairs judgment, memory, attention, coordination and reaction time. Physically, long-term pot use can cause respiratory issues such as chronic cough or bronchitis. Many users would agree that they have felt some impact in one or more of these areas. **Can anyone here agree based on their own experience?**

Talking about Path 3 – “The Gateway to Harder Drugs” – Often in spite of the best of intentions, some marijuana users eventually do move on to harder drugs. This can take many years but some unfortunate individuals find themselves addicted to drugs like heroin later in life after starting as a young person with marijuana. Try to be open minded and honest when considering the following questions for discussion:



- Who do you know who started with marijuana who is now into harder drugs?
- If you are willing to share – Has this ever happened to anyone in your extended family?
- Can you see this happening to any of your friends?
- Honestly, since you started with marijuana have you tried any drugs that you thought you never would?
- Does anyone ever consciously choose this path? In other words, do people usually start smoking weed with the thought that one day they will be addicted to heroin or other “hard” drugs?
- Is simply saying “I will never move on to harder drugs” enough to completely prevent that from happening? When we promise “never” does that always come true? To put this in perspective consider the following:

Time Travel: Imagine that you are back in time and you are only about 8 or 9 years old. How do you think you would answer the following questions as your 8 or 9 year old self?

- Are you ever going to try smoking weed?
- Do you think you will ever end up getting in trouble with the law?
- Will you ever end up in a substance abuse program?

It is likely that your younger self would have said “NEVER!” to one or more of those questions. Yet, perhaps those things did occur in your life as a teen. Do you see the point? – Is saying “That will never happen to me!” enough to keep something from happening?

Now think about an older person who is addicted to a drug like heroin who started as a youth by smoking marijuana. If you asked that person about their attitude about heroin when they were a teenager who was just smoking weed, what do you think that person would say?

- Older people who started with marijuana as a young person with marijuana who later find themselves addicted to drugs like heroin may say that when they were a teen, they too said “It will never happen to me – I will never move on from weed to harder drugs”. Again, did saying “NEVER!” make a difference?

Discuss: If saying “It will never happen to me” alone is not enough to prevent more serious drug addiction, then what are some factors that can contribute to someone moving on from marijuana to harder drugs?

The fact is that there are many factors that can lead someone to move on from marijuana to other drugs. Sometimes, there may be no clear explanation at all why this happens but there are some situations that can increase the likelihood of this. *Consider a few.*

Genetic factors: The science is very strong that addiction can be inherited as there is irrefutable evidence that a child can inherit addictive traits when there is a history of addiction in a family. No one is destined to become addicted to substances just because a parent had a problem, however the odds are increased. Therefore, some unfortunate individuals have a much higher tendency to struggle with addiction due to genetic predisposition. This is not necessarily a fair thing in life, but it is reality. Many diseases follow this genetic course such as cancer, heart disease, asthma, depression, anxiety disorders, diabetes and many others. Again, keep in mind that when a disease (like addiction) runs in a family, that just means that there is a genetic predisposition (increased risk) but no guarantee it will happen. (You do not need to worry that you are “destined” to become addicted to something if you had a parent with a drug or alcohol problem it is just that there is a higher chance when compared with someone with no addiction in their family)



Self-Medication - Many people swear their marijuana use is as an excellent cure for anxiety as well as for insomnia and other issues - What happens when over time (perhaps years later) the marijuana doesn't work as well for your symptoms? What is the danger of no longer just wanting marijuana but now **needing it to self-medicate**? What can happen to teens/young adults who do not learn to deal with anxiety and stress but rather simply turn to getting high as the "cure" and then one day the high just doesn't work anymore? Consider the following real life examples:

- Buck, age 25 – Buck started smoking weed at age 15 mostly for fun. Buck soon found out that his weed smoking calmed him down significantly. When he felt stressed, angry or anxious, he smoked a bowl and felt so much better. This worked for close to 10 years for Buck. However, now at age 25, Buck has a lot more on his plate as he feels there is a lot more pressure, being an adult who has to pay bills and stuff like that. Buck still likes to smoke weed when he is stressed but he finds the weed alone isn't doing enough for him. Buck gets a prescription for Xanax and starts taking Xanax along with his weed to calm down. Soon thereafter, Buck builds a tolerance to the Xanax too and starts taking more than he is prescribed. Buck soon finds himself in a much more challenging situation as he is dependent on Xanax in addition to just smoking weed alone.
- Scarlet – age 30 – Scarlet smoked weed steadily since age 16 and she found marijuana smoking to be a great way to help her with her anxiety, ADHD and insomnia for years. She still did pretty well in life, establishing a career in business and living on her own in a nice apartment with a nice car and a stable relationship with her fiancée. Years later, however, Scarlet gets into a car accident and injures her lower back. In order to get back to work, Scarlet gets prescribed opiate pain medication. Soon, Scarlet finds that the pain pills are better for her anxiety and pain than just the weed alone, since she has such a strong tolerance. Eventually her opiate pain use takes over for her marijuana use and she finds herself physically and mentally dependent on the pain pills. After her doctor cuts her off from pain pills after a year, Scarlet eventually has to start using heroin because buying pain pills on the street becomes too expensive. Not too long afterward, her heroin use takes over her life eventually causing the loss of her job, her home and her fiancée.

Do these examples seem farfetched? Most counselors can tell you that stories such as Buck's and Scarlet's examples, are all too commonplace. A question for consideration is: ***Even if people say that marijuana helps them with their anxiety, is marijuana use always a good long term answer to coping with anxiety, stress or other mental conditions?***

Dependency by Association: People often associate marijuana use with making activities more enjoyable – movies are funnier, school and work is less boring, music sounds better, etc. Is it possible that forming an association between an activity and marijuana use can foster a dependency on marijuana use? Consider the following examples:

- Tony loved to smoke some weed and get high with his friends and then sit back and enjoy a good movie. Watching movies while high became a regular pattern for Tony. After a while of doing this, one day Tony wasn't able to get any weed prior to going to watch a movie with his friends. When watching the movie completely sober he couldn't stop thinking to himself "This would be so much better if I was high" Even though the movie itself was good, Tony's association with getting high and watching movies prevented him from fully enjoying it sober. He had to have weed to fully enjoy himself.
- Sam's favorite thing in the world since he was in grammar school was to play the guitar. One day when he was in high school, Sam got introduced into smoking marijuana when jamming out with his guitar. Sam immediately felt more creative and free when playing his guitar when he was high. However, after several months of playing guitar when high, he started to notice that when he wasn't high, he didn't feel as creative and he could no longer write any good songs for his band, unless he was high. By association, Sam realized he was dependent upon getting high first in order to fully enjoy his guitar playing. Sam went from just enjoying playing while high to needing to be high to play.



Can anyone identify with either of these stories in a similar way?

Addiction: It is a misnomer to say that marijuana is not addictive simply because it is not physically addictive in the same way that a drug like heroin can cause a person to feel extremely sick when not using. However **psychological** (mental) **addiction** can be extremely powerful. Consider some of the following facts about how even marijuana can be psychologically addictive –

- Chronic marijuana users may experience a withdrawal syndrome after quitting which may include insomnia, irritability, anxiety, and cravings – **Has anyone here experienced this?** Do you know of anyone who starts to lose it when they go too long without their weed?
- Marijuana dependence remains one of the most common reasons for treatment admissions in the US and not all are involuntary
- As discussed earlier, many marijuana users can probably cite an example of a successful, rich pothead but that is often the ideal, not the norm. Why is it that studies show that chronic marijuana users:
 - a. Call out of work more than non-users
 - b. Make less money on average when compared directly with non-users
 - c. Have more on the job accidents than non-users
 - d. Fewer chronic marijuana users successfully complete college than non-users
- Why do some people make such huge sacrifices for their marijuana use including:
 - Parents losing custody of children to child protective services simply because of an inability or unwillingness to stop smoking pot in order to get kids back
 - Violation of parole or probation with possible jail time due to inability or unwillingness to stop smoking pot.
 - Turning down or simply ruining an excellent job or career opportunity because of drug testing and an inability or unwillingness to stop smoking pot

If marijuana use is not addictive, why do some people make such great sacrifices to keep using?

Final conclusions:

- Thankfully, most people who smoke marijuana never move on to becoming addicted to harder drugs.
- The majority of people who use marijuana do not become addicted. However, there are definitely some individuals who do become psychologically dependent on marijuana in spite of their best intentions. Factors such as self-medicating can play a role in this process especially when marijuana moves on from a recreational situation, to becoming a “need” (Someone who has to have their weed)
- Some marijuana smokers will eventually become addicted to more severe drugs at some point sooner or later. The gateway phenomenon does not happen to everyone who uses marijuana but it surely happens to some
- There are many factors that can play a role with regard to the marijuana gateway drug phenomenon including genetics, trauma, family, social and emotional factors, therefore choice alone does not determine the outcome. A young person simply saying “I will never move on to harder drugs” by itself not enough to absolutely prevent that from occurring. This process can be much more complex than just being a “self-control” issue alone.