

High Risk

The mental health of the young is being endangered by widespread cannabis use

The evidence for the deleterious effects of cannabis use on the adolescent brain is weighty, extensive and impressive. Early exposure to cannabis impairs cognitive functions such as reasoning ability and memory recall. Damage can be permanent. The popular stereotype of the incoherent, forgetful stoner exists for a reason. Where the stereotype lacks accuracy is that it tends to portray regular users as mellow, happy, relaxed individuals. They almost certainly are not.

New research in the journal *JAMA Psychiatry* reveals that teenagers and young adults who smoke cannabis (about one in six 16-24-year-olds admits to lighting up) are more likely to become anxious and depressed and in some cases to consider suicide than their non-using peers. The correlation between cannabis use and poorer mental health is undisputed.

As for the causality, some apologists may argue that it is those youngsters already prone to depression who are most likely to try cannabis. There may be some truth in that, yet the expert consensus is that taking up this habit will do nothing to alleviate existing unhappiness, and

may drive some individuals to greater depths of despair and possibly self-harm. Teenagers most likely to smoke cannabis are those whose personalities are most likely to be adversely affected by the drug. Pre-18 cannabis use may be responsible for about 7 per cent of depression in young adults. That adds up to tens of thousands of people in Britain. The evidence suggests that cannabis use does not negate depression but multiplies its effects.

The new study creates the most robust link between youthful cannabis use and depression. The connection of the drug to a heavily increased risk of psychosis among young users is even better established. At the extreme, this psychosis can lead to long-term institutionalisation. Addiction specialists report that patients with prolonged cannabis habits are often harder to treat than those wedded to what the law considers to be more harmful drugs. Alcohol also contributes to mental health problems, but society strives to balance its pleasures and its harms.

Much data associates the use of cannabis with personal and societal ills as varied as low educational achievement, traffic accidents and

chronic bronchitis. The tobacco that cannabis is traditionally mixed with does no good either.

Anyone with a sense of smell will know, walking through Britain's cities and increasingly its smaller towns and villages, how widespread the use of cannabis has become. In many respects it has been effectively decriminalised, and further liberalisation is likely at some stage. The British College of Psychiatrists is said to be considering abandoning its opposition to legalisation. That is despite the market dominance in recent years of much stronger strains of the drug, with a far higher content of THC, its psychoactive ingredient.

Many parents, perhaps with their own youthful experience of consumption are surprisingly tolerant of their children's use of cannabis. They need to inform themselves and their children about the dangers of what has become an alarmingly familiar recreation. Too much of the debate has focused on cannabis's medicinal benefit as a pain relief for those suffering chronic physical illness, and too little attention has been paid to the drug's far wider psychological impact, which is anything but benign. That debate needs to start now.

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