

The Effect of Drugs on Mental Health

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Some time ago, a renowned psychologist and professor named Bruce Alexander conducted a study on some hapless rats whereby he established a rat society of Utopian standards. These powerless rats were then given access to two water sources, one containing morphine and the other containing pure, fresh water. Despite the addictive nature of the morphine, none of the rats developed an addiction. Why was this? Well, it's because the rats were living in their own little heaven. They were as happy as can be, socialising together, playing, bonding with their rat babies and exploring their environment which was filled with interesting platforms to climb and tins to crawl into. They were so happy but when Bruce took away their access to fresh water and force fed them the morphine tainted water he expected to create a rat park of addiction. What actually happened is when clean water was reintroduced, the rats went back to drinking it with no signs of having developed an addiction (apart from a few withdrawal symptoms). You may be asking yourself how is this possible, I thought morphine was highly addictive? The answer lay in the mental health of the rats. They were happy and didn't need to get a fix. An unhappy rat is more likely to self-medicate and try to escape their miserable existence through addiction. I think it is safe to say that we can take this logic and use to benefit our lives in the human world.

I am now going to compare teenagers to rats due to their unpredictable, moody and defensive nature (the teenagers that is, not the rats). They may not like this but let's be honest with ourselves, it's not that hard of a comparison to make. Much like rats, teenagers are creatures that need sufficient stimulation. If a teenager is not engaged by their environment, they may look to other sources for excitement such as illegal drugs or alcohol. Drugs have an addictive nature because of one common characteristic – their ability to provide pleasure. If a teenager is happy and content in themselves, they will not look for outside sources to make them fulfilled. It has been shown that teenagers who have a positive relationship with their parents and those in their community are less likely to use drugs or alcohol. On the other hand, if a young person is not in a happy environment where they feel included, they, much like the rats, will look to other things such as drugs to make themselves feel positive. Once the teen realises that the drugs they're taking are making things a little easier, they will quickly become addicted.

There are two main reasons that I am almost exclusively talking about teenagers. Firstly, teenagers are more likely to become addicted and relapse as their brains are far more motivated by drug-related cues than an adults, and secondly, as a teenager myself I feel that I can relate on some level. As we know, almost anything can send a teenager's emotions spiralling out of control. A teen who is unhappy with problems such as low self-esteem is a ticking time bomb when it comes to being a potential drug addict. When somebody does become addicted, some very bad things can happen to the state of their mental health.

To identify mental health problems we first need to realise what good mental health is. Mental health is a pretty broad term. It can mean the physical health of our brain or our psychological state but I'm going to focus on the psychological side of things. For a person to have good mental health, they need social and emotional balance in their lives and they need to be able to feel and deal with both positive and negative experiences. Generally, a person with balance and coping strategies does not feel the need for drugs. Now for bad mental health – simply put it is an imbalance leading to unhappiness and leads to the possibility of turning to drugs for support. Drugs can then trigger more serious mental health problems.

In the beginning, the user may feel that the effects the drugs are having aren't too severe but they couldn't be more wrong. The effects are actually devastating. As soon as a drug such as methamphetamine, LSD or marijuana is taken into the body it quickly reaches the bloodstream and from there spreads throughout the body and accesses the brain. There is no going back. Depending on the ingested drug, it could begin affecting the parts of the brain controlling emotion, memory, movement or perception. From a mental health point of view, possibly the most dangerous is emotion control. A user can be left with deep seated feelings of depression fuelling even more addiction that can spiral to suicidal thoughts.

What many people seem to forget is that not only do drugs affect the user but also those close to them such as their friends and family. Depression can lead to antisocial behaviour and the user excluding those close to them. This can deeply affect families. Another scenario where the mental health of a family can be compromised is if a drug user accidentally overdoses and dies, leaving a family to bury their son, daughter, brother or sister.

All this brings me to the conclusion that now more than ever we need to tackle drug taking among teenagers to prevent the formation of a society with young people suffering from depression, schizophrenia or other drug related mental

illnesses. Bringing us back to the rats, they proved to us that when in an environment where both their physical and emotional needs are met in an active community, they perform as high functioning, well-adjusted members of their little society. Maybe the mental health needs of teenagers should be met in a similar fashion and they would find it easier to take control of their lives and say no to drugs.

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