

Marijuana and mental health: experience on the ground

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From a very young age, we're told "drugs are bad". And by and large, drugs *are* bad, though marijuana has always been something of a grey area to many minds. Some studies say that it causes psychosis, makes anxiety worse and can lead to further mental health issues, but with continuing low-level support for the decriminalisation of the drug, this reporter decided to investigate if marijuana poses a threat to mental health, not only in theory, but in the lives of Irish marijuana users.

Doctor Adam Winstock spoke to me about the issue of marijuana use and mental health issues. He mentioned a study that took place in Australia, in 2012 that measured the usage of marijuana in 1943 students to see if there was a corresponding rise in mental health issues. As the report stated, "most reports [on this topic] have focused on associations in adolescence, with few studies extending into adulthood". The report found "no consistent associations" between cannabis use and depression; however, it was linked to anxiety disorders in those who used cannabis daily. Conflicting? Absolutely. It's one of the many studies done in this area that directly conflicts another study. It's difficult to understand this drug, so I spoke to some users to get an idea of how marijuana impacts on their mental health.

My first interview, an NUI Galway student named Sinéad, described herself as a "social smoker", and uses cannabis once or twice a week. She outlined a recent bad experience to me, but nonetheless is happy to continue "because it's really fun and I know now what to do when I smoke too much". Sinéad also mentioned that she suffers from anxiety, and has been prescribed medication in the past. I asked her about putting the two, together, however, and her answer was surprising: "I smoke

more now, and I think my anxiety isn't as bad as it was last year, but that could be due to a whole bunch of factors...I've got a better handle on my life these days too and really like college". She noted the "weed hangover" issue: "I get paranoid sometimes, but that's a fairly common side effect. The next day I might be tired and sluggish and sometimes it's harder to concentrate when I've been smoking the night before....I might also feel kind of sad, but nowhere near the sad levels that I associated with drinking. It takes a while to leave my system so sometimes I'm not my highest functioning self." This student gives a different picture to what we'd typically think of when considering this issue, but is she just an anomaly?

Speaking to Niamh, a student who suffers from numerous anxiety disorders, makes definite links between this and her past drug abuse. "I'm not really bothered doing it anymore because I finally copped that it wasn't a coincidence that I was getting heart palpitations every time I did it". It's great to see Irish students take control of their mental health like this and seeing the effect – but does that come too late for some? Niamh says that she thought of herself as a "weed smoking rebel" at age 16 or 17 but her anxiety, possibly stemming from weed use, made her cut it out. Nowadays, she is twenty-one and doesn't use because of her mental health issues. She describes the "feedback loop" that another weed user who suffers from anxiety noted to me. Users feel anxious, worry that it is the weed that makes them feel this way, and then have to deal with "double anxiety".

Others surveyed considered themselves free from mental health issues but did note "feeling gloomy" after smoking. Andrew, a graduate, described this as "not severe enough to make me stop but it did make me take note that there probably are consequences to abusing this drug....I can't say if any paranoia I've experienced while sober is as a result of using marijuana. Sure I can be a bit anxious or paranoid

sometimes, but it's normal to have these feelings from time to time. None of these anxieties have been significant enough to make me think it was due to weed, or even to give up weed.” Andrew said that he is “considerate of his mental health” when using and consumes in moderation.

These three very different experiences of interaction of marijuana serve to further complicate the picture of just how using and anxiety are linked. Anxiety is not an easy disorder to understand or to diagnose – as Niamh said in her interview, anxiety disorders “make you doubt yourself and make you feel like you’re just looking for attention”.

An Irish Times article published in January of last year saying that support for decriminalisation of marijuana is growing; in my own experience, I’ve seen Gardaí turn a blind eye to people using the drug in public.

Good or bad, weed is in the public sphere, not hidden away like other more serious drugs. Séan Lynch, spokesperson for the Students for Sensible Drug Policy, said: “Currently we have very little of this information that could be used to make more informed approaches to treating mass cannabis use that we are experiencing today. We currently don't even know how many people in Ireland use cannabis every day and what the strains they are using are. This is not a good position to begin to tackle mental health problems”. In light of research saying that anxiety and weed use are linked and the apparent surge in anxiety amongst Ireland’s young people isn’t it time we take marijuana a little more seriously?

