The Rise of Legal Marijuana Sparks the Return of Old Stigmas

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With more and more states legalizing medical and/or recreational marijuana, a lot of past social stigmas are resurfacing. While some states have legalized recreational and/or medical marijuana use, the drug still remains illegal on the federal level despite continuing attempts to legalize cannabis across the country. A lot of the resistance against marijuana comes from worries concerning user health, social safety, and other social stigmas surrounding the plant.

Marijuana (Cannabis) is classified as a Schedule I drug, alongside LSD, Ecstasy and Heroin, Schedule I drugs are the substances with the highest risk of addiction and no current medical use. Schedule II drugs are considered to have a lesser risk of addiction. This category includes drugs like cocaine, methamphetamines, methadone, and fentanyl (the drug that has the most media and political attention at the moment). Xanax is a Schedule IV drug, 3 tiers below Marijuana. Alcohol, of which its addiction issues are well-known, is not even considered a controlled substance according to the Controlled Substances Act, therefore it is not ranked in these categories.

All drugs or substances that are under regulation by the U.S. government are categorized in the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. These decisions were based on the risk of abuse, medical use, risk to users and the public, and the potential for psychotic or physiological dependence. Fifty-five years later, research shows that cocaine, methamphetamine and opiates are far more addictive than marijuana, but the ranking of marijuana has not changed. It remains a schedule I drug.

Alcohol is the most widely abused substance in the United States with 44.5% of liver disease deaths related to alcohol and 32% of driving fatalities being alcohol related; Alcohol Use Disorder is the second most common mental disorder among those who took their own lives with 21% of suicide decedents having a blood alcohol of 0.1% or higher. In comparison, The DEA has never reported marijuana as the direct cause of death.

That being said, there is not a lot of research about marijuana because its federal illegal status makes it hard for scientists to legally conduct experiments. The research that we do have can sometimes be confusing as well, as comparing marijuana and alcohol is like comparing apples and oranges.

Yet, when we can look to states that have had legal marijuana for the longest for some insight. In Colorado there were 10,511 driving fatalities in 2018. During that same year, driving fatalities involving a driver with 5 nanograms or more of marijuana accounted for 42 deaths. For every one person that died due to a marijuana related car accident, 250 people died due to alcohol related accidents. In California, 19,335 people died from 2020-2021 due to excessive alcohol use compared to 0 marijuana overdoses. Additionally, alcohol has been found to be factor in 40% of all violent crimes in the U.S., yet there is no outstanding correlation between violence and marijuana. Furthermore, the chances of physical abuse are eight times higher on days that men tend to drink alcohol, but the same is not seen in marijuana use. Finally, The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network’

(RAINN) says that alcohol is the most common chemical in sexual assault crimes when listing common date rape drugs. On that list are other drugs like prescription pills, tranquilizers and “roofies”. It should be noted that marijuana is not mentioned anywhere in the whole article.

That being said, marijuana is not perfect. Inhaling any sort of smoke is dangerous and cannabis is no exception. The DEA says extended smoking of cannabis can lead to bronchitis, emphysema and other respiratory diseases/illnesses. However, when we look at the data for lung cancer, the majority of cases are caused by cigarette smoking. Marijuana research has been unclear so far but shows chronic marijuana smoking might increase your chances for cancer but additional research is needed. Luckily, smoking is not the only way to consume marijuana. Vessels like edible gummies, topical oils, etc. can also be used.

The legalization of marijuana has been pushed mainly to remove the illegal underground market, produce more regulated products, and increase tax revenue, but weed was also legalized partially for its medical benefits. Marijuana has been used for chronic pain, inflammation, help with nausea, appetite in cancer patients, hand trembling, etc.. Marijuana is far less addictive than opiates and impossible to overdose on, so it is a far safer replacement. Patients have reported preferring marijuana as a chronic pain killer over opiates because they feel more engaged and less spaced out compared to opiates.

As mentioned previously, the research surrounding marijuana and its physical/social impacts is limited because of federal restrictions. Legalization of marijuana will allow us to learn more about the drug and its pros and cons. However, when we do look at the statistics for each substance, marijuana tends to be safer socially. Alcohol tends to cost U.S. citizens more in repairs, causes more driving fatalities, involve more instances of domestic abuse, and be used more in acts of sexual assault. Physically, marijuana is also safer. Marijuana is responsible for less overdoses and less hospital visits, and is significantly less addictive than alcohol. Yet, marijuana is still federally illegal and placed in the most dangerous drug class. Is it time to perhaps ask why?