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Why People Abuse Alcohol and Drugs

Can you help me understand what people are looking for when they use/abuse alcohol and/or other drugs?

To Get High

Some people use alcohol and drugs because they actually want to get high. They are looking for the “feel good” feelings they have learned they cannot get in any other way. Some people say they only feel good when they start using alcohol and drugs. Some say that they feel better than they have ever felt. They do not feel “drunk” or “stoned” in the usual sense of the word. What they feel is a euphoric sense of well-being. Everything seems right. Everything seems to be working well. They feel normal, competent, functional and relaxed. They feel like they can handle anything that comes their way. They feel like they can be anything they want to be. They feel like they can do anything they want to do.

This feeling of well-being is euphoria. This euphoria, this feeling, this state of consciousness, is different from anything else they have ever experienced. This is the feeling that addicts want to have. After a while, this becomes the feeling that they need to have—the feeling they become willing to do just about anything to get.

To Relax

Some people use alcohol and drugs because they want to relax. This helps to turn off stress, to get away from pressure and to calm down and feel mellow. Downers (alcohol, narcotics, benzodiazepines, and marijuana) are the usual drug of choice for relaxing.

To Be More Social

Some people use alcohol and drugs because they want to be more social. Alcohol and drugs make it appear easier to get along with other people. Many people feel that their self-esteem is improved when they use alcohol and drugs. So, as a result, it is easier for them to deal with other people. This new and improved social state is caused, in part, by the biological action of the alcohol and drugs.

Another big part of the action is psychological. When under the influence of alcohol and drugs many people can give themselves permission to do things they would never be able to do sober. (I can blame my behavior on being under the influence). Many people have developed their social personality upon their self-image as a drinker and drug user. If they were to stop using alcohol and other drugs, they wouldn't be sure of who they really were, how people viewed them, and how they fit into the world.



To Manage Feelings

Some people use alcohol and drugs because they want to manage feelings. They may want to get rid of “bad” or uncomfortable feelings. They may want to start feeling good, or they may want to make “good” feelings better. The mood altering effects of alcohol and other drugs make them perfect tools for managing feelings. If you do not like the way you feel, relief is just a swallow away.

The problem is this: when a person manages their feelings with alcohol and drugs, they have no need to develop or use other emotional management tools. As a result, they need to use alcohol or other drugs in order to cope with any strong feelings. One of the primary tasks in adolescent development is to learn how to responsibly manage strong feelings and emotions. People who start using alcohol or other drugs on a regular basis during their teenage years never learn these skills. Why work hard at learning how to manage feelings when a quick dose of alcohol or drugs will allow you to manage it with little or no effort? As a result, most addicted people find it very difficult to manage feelings and emotions when they try to get into recovery.

To Get More Energy

Some people use alcohol and drugs because they want to get more energy. They want to get stimulated, feel excited, and be powerful. The drugs that are most likely to produce these energizing effects are the uppers (amphetamine, methamphetamine, and cocaine). The power this drug induces is a false sense of power. You feel down on yourself, lonely, and weak. Then you snort a line of cocaine or shoot up some meth. All of a sudden, you feel superhuman. Are you? Of course not! You are the same person you were before you took the drug with one very important exception—the drug is distorting your judgment and making you feel like something you’re not. You are no stronger, tougher, or competent than you were before. You just feel like you are.

To Block Out Pain

Some people use alcohol and drugs because they want to block out pain. They want to get rid of unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and memories. Narcotics, like heroin and morphine, are most likely to produce this effect. The primary pain people want to escape from is emotional. Because they have been using drugs to manage their feelings, they have learned to manage their emotional pain. So whenever their feelings get hurt, out comes the bottle, or the needle, or the line of coke. Why? It is because the pain feels unbearable and they don’t know any other way to handle it.

To Be More Spiritual

Finally, some people use alcohol and drugs because they want to be more spiritual. They want to alter their consciousness and have mystical feelings. They want to be spiritually connected and learn to transcend themselves by

connecting with some higher power, higher vision, or higher set of values. They also want to feel closer and more deeply connected with other people. The Psychedelics (LSD and Ecstasy) are most likely to produce this effect. Once again, there is a problem. Most drug induced spiritual experiences are not genuine. They are merely the effect of the drug disrupting your brain chemistry in a social setting suggestive of spirituality. The same is true of intimacy. If two people take Ecstasy and fall in love with each other, they usually are not experiencing a genuine sense of love. What they are experiencing is a shared love of the euphoric high that they are sharing in the moment.

Does everyone who uses alcohol or drugs get the effect that they want to get? No. Drugs produce the desired effect for some people and not for others. This is because brain chemistry can respond to the actions of a drug in two different ways:

1. When you have a **normal brain response**, the drug makes you feel what it was designed to make you feel. The mood altering effect is consistent with the chemical structure of the drug. The reaction of the brain to the drug does not interfere with the primary action of the drug. Therefore, the Normal Brain Response to a depressant drug is a feeling of relaxation, and so forth.
2. The **addictive brain response** causes a feeling of euphoria that enhances, alters, or overrides the expected mood altering effect of the drug. You do not feel what the drug was designed to make you feel. You feel the combination of a euphoric effect and the normal effect of the drug.

This is because the drug releases a flood of pleasure chemicals in the brain. These pleasure chemicals override the normal drug effect and create a unique feeling of euphoria and well-being.

An addictive brain response to alcohol would be a slightly sedated sense of euphoria. An addictive brain response to cocaine would be a slightly stimulated sense of euphoria. This means that the mood altering effect of any drug that activates an addictive brain response will produce a similar underlying state of mood altering euphoria, plus the influence of whatever direct effect the drug was designed to have.

A **drug of choice** is any drug that activates an Addictive Brain Response. The drug effect feels so good that when given a choice people will choose it above all other drugs. The problem is this—people who experience this addictive brain response are at high-risk of addiction to the mind-altering drug that causes it.

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