

Marijuana Use By Kids and Teens: Parents, Pay Attention!

Two adult cases in my practice offer wake-up calls about long-term harm.

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Fascinating fun or flirting with lifelong harm?

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I live in Colorado, one of the first two states to legalize marijuana first for medicinal use and now also for use by anyone over the age of 21. My conclusion: our society in general and [teenagers](#) in particular need to pay attention. While pot may not be chemically addictive the way, say, [cocaine](#) or crack are, excessive use can be a huge mistake. [Marijuana](#) can re-route a life totally off-course, causing irreversible [cognitive](#) and emotional harm that can undermine [career](#) success, and inviting relationship damage that [marriage counseling](#) cannot reverse.

[Smoking](#) pot first became an option for middle class Americans in the late 1960's. Emerging along with hallucinogenic [drugs](#) like LSD, which create a psychotic-like mental state, pot appeared them to be a far lesser [evil](#) and hence an option that many college students tried. At that time, experimentation was truly that, as no research existed on the impacts of smoking pot on the development of a person's life. Smoking pot looked like a daring experiment that college students could try. And of the many who did, a relatively small proportion continued to smoke after their first exploratory attempts, while most treated marijuana smoking "trips" like travel: "Interesting place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there."

Related Links

- [How to Get Off Marijuana](#)
- [How to Get Off Marijuana](#)
- [Why Pot Should Be Legal](#)
- [Why Pot Should Be Legal](#)
- [Reasons Why Your Teen Is Drinking](#)

Clinical cases of the impacts of marijuana use on adult functioning

Two cases of pot use in my clinical practice have most dramatically impressed me with regard to current adults whose smoking started in their younger years. In both of these cases, the husband had been a marijuana user since early high school. This pattern accords with research suggesting that the earlier young people first begin using marijuana, the more likely they will end up using it addictively. Junior high (middle school) or younger is particularly dangerous in terms of [addiction](#) potential and also [brain](#) injury. High school years are still dangerous though slightly less so. College initial experimentation has milder likelihood of leading to a problem habit and brain damage but still poses significant risks.

In one of the [therapy](#) cases, the wife was considering leaving her husband, Joe, because Joe had been unable to fulfill the role of breadwinner. Joe had been well-educated, at least in terms of having completed college and a reputable university. He worked some after college, but over the subsequent ten years, and especially when he needed to job hunt, he just couldn't get going. His significant (multiple hours daily) pot use had [burned out](#) his starter engine. I recognized right away the similarity between Joe's inability to start projects, both larger projects like seeking employment and small projects like loading the dishwasher.

I recognized the cognitive deficit of loss of ability to initiate because I'd learned about it from observing my [aging](#) mother. My mother had been a lifelong dynamo in terms of accomplishments and [leadership](#). In her 70's when she began to show first signs of the cognitive declines that eventually became [dementia](#), two cognitive abilities showed decrements. Her losses of short term [memory](#) capacity showed in repetitions; she would say, and then say again the same comment.

My mother's second type of cognitive decline confused us more. Calling a friend to meet for coffee felt too difficult for her. So did inviting neighbors for dinner, or starting to cook. Initiation of action, it turned out, requires a spark plug she no longer had. Joe's spark plug

similarly had disappeared. And in fact, decreases in ability to initiate action were one of the first cognitive deficits caused by excessive marijuana use that researchers discovered as they began to look for long term impacts of pot smoking.

The second therapy case that stood out for me involved a lovely, highly capable and highly likable couple with two totally adorable young boys. The woman was both strikingly attractive and a winner in her professional life. The man, let's call him William, also very good looking, had a work track record as a CEO that had left them already, by their late 40's, set up financially for life. Yet at home the wife complained that she never felt connected with her husband. He didn't share information with her about his work life, he didn't initiate conversations, and if they did talk, she felt like no one was home. Their gears didn't seem to mesh. At long last the truth came out. For years when William returned home from work he had immediately started smoking or otherwise ingesting pot.

William's habit also had started in high school. He actually smoked less in college where the many activities in his Ivy League university kept him quite fully engaged. As a young adult however he had started smoking again, and by the time his boys had both reached elementary school, he rarely spent time at home without being stoned. The [marriage](#) had problems, with a wife who felt chronically dissatisfied. The more she felt irritated, the less comfortable William felt interacting with her without first having gotten high. At the same time, the more his mental state was skewed by pot, the more William's wife felt frustrated and disconnected from him. Alas, by the time that the truth of his addiction had emerged, his wife had reached a point of no return and wanted only to terminate the marriage.

What can be done to protect kids and teens from being harmed by marijuana use?

For starters, our society as a whole, at least here in legal-to-smoke-pot Colorado, needs to be educated about the harms that can be done by even occasional pot use, especially by youth and teenagers.

Toward this educational end, I recommend for starters the simple and easily accessible new book by Marc Aronoff called [One Toke: A Survival Guide for Teens](#). Aronoff takes a perspective toward pot smoking that's remarkably flexible and yet clear. If you are going to use pot, he says, use it in a smart way. Keep it occasional rather than a daily habit. Make sure it is not interfering with getting homework in on time or with connecting with friends and afterschool [sports](#), music or other important activities of teenager years. And smoke safely, including NEVER in conjunction with driving.

In addition to what teens can read in **One Toke**, young people and their [parents](#) need to learn about the [findings of recent studies](#) of the impacts of pot-smoking on young people's developing brains. These studies strike a dire note.

Neuroimaging pictures of the brain's various parts show that young people who smoke regularly (that is, once a week or more) show frightening brain changes. They develop smaller brains. They show losses in [intelligence](#) (as evidenced by [a 2012 longitudinal study of 1,037 participants](#)), and they produce less "grey matter" (the stuff of intelligence).

Pot-smokers show other unfortunate decrements as well. They become more prone to depression and other states of emotional distress. The smoking may trigger a psychotic episode, and also may launch on-going [paranoia](#) (as in a very sad clinical case I saw today). Users in their teen years or younger typically grow physically smaller than their non-smoking teenage peers. They tend to gravitate toward loser/drop-out social groups. If pot-smoking leads them to disengage from taking school and studying seriously, they squander their educational years so that they then will enter the workworld as young adults from a significantly disadvantaged position.

[One Toke](#) is good starter reading for children, and then needs to be supplemented by exploration on the internet of the many enlightening resources for parents and kids. Explore them. Take them seriously. Pot addiction can have lifelong negative consequences. Look ahead.

-----For an indexed listing of Dr. H's posts, see *Dr. H's Blogposts* on her [clinical website](#).-----