

Drug Abuse Among Adolescents

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Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present an Adlerian view of drug abuse among adolescents. Specifically the reasons for using drugs, the life styles of abusers, and recommendations for treatment are made within a context which sees the individual as purposive, goal directed, and capable of change.

Initial Use

There are many reasons why adolescents begin to use drugs. Shulman (1969) lists the following reasons: 1. There may be a need to prove that they are mature. 2. There may be an attempt to find a place within the peer group. 3. If they feel inferior, drug use is a way to feel superior to others. 4. If they feel inadequate, there may be a turn to useless behavior such as drug use. 5. By breaking rules and using drugs, they can feel defiant and heroic. 6. Drug use is an excellent way to upset parents. 7. Drug use is an excellent way to hurt parents and get even for felt injustices. Adolescents learn that a most effective way to hurt parents is through damaging their own bodies. Drugs can be an efficient method for destruction of the body and sending fear into the hearts of their parents. Adventure and excitement seeking are additional reasons for using drugs.

Abusers

Persons who focus on drug use as an important part of daily living are likely to have been pampered as children. Sometimes, drug abusers were hated or neglected. Often, drug abusers are looking for instant success and immediate escape from the realities of life. They are poorly prepared to meet the life tasks (Adler, 1958).

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The Pampered Life Style

After children have been pampered, they feel that the world is unfair. Pampered children develop distorted images of their environment. They take more from the world than they contribute to it. They do not realize they expect more than they are willing to give. Their views of fairness are so biased that they feel the world expects too much of them, that people don't recognize their uniqueness, that people don't understand them, and that if people really understood how difficult a time they've had, that others would not expect so much from them. These are the clouded glasses with which pampered children perceive the people in the world (Croake, 1977).

Pampered children are protected from the realities of life. Parents, and most often especially mothers, have done for them what they could have done themselves. For example, pampered children are dressed, fed special foods, helped with their homework, and taken care of. They seldom contribute to the family by sharing in household chores.

People who have been pampered as children receive a cold bath of reality at adolescence. Suddenly, they are expected to make vocational choices with course selections in school. In addition, they must work out relationships with the other sex and learn to find their place in a social group of peers which are now more important than the family.

The demanding behavior of pampered children, which has been so effective in manipulating family members into their service, now becomes ineffective in the peer setting (Dreikurs, 1972). These demands can be obvious or they can be subtle in the form of tears, shyness, depression, anxiety or fearfulness. In truth, they are still demands for special recognition and support from others. Peers are likely to recognize manipulative behavior, and refuse to give in to such demands. During adolescence, pampered persons must face a great deal of frustration, anxiety and defeat (Croake, 1977).

To the pampered, drugs offer immediate escape from the realities of daily existence. Drugs are an instant elevator of perceived worth. Pampered adolescents obtain a feeling of belonging without having *to go through the slow step by step process that brings real success*. To the pampered, growing up means freedom from control. Drugs give the illusion of instant freedom. Pampered children are likely to be very ambitious because they believe that they are special. This ambition results in an idealized self, or a vision of what one would like to be, that is realistically out of reach. The idealized self hates the actual self. The first step toward success through meaningful effort is

viewed as too distant from the idealized self, so pampered adolescents seize drugs as the short cut to worth and dignity.

Poor Social Adjustment

Drug users, like alcoholics, often feel that they can relate better to people when they are high. They feel that their shyness and inhibitions are lessened through drug use. In truth, when people are high, their social skills are poor in quality. The interaction is often self centered and shows little interest in the needs and concerns of others. Pampered adolescents already think too much of themselves and too little of the welfare of others. Taking drugs only increases the focus on the self. Adler (1956) described drug users as people with underdeveloped social interest and an overdeveloped selfish interest. Drug users are not concerned with the needs of society. Their primary interest is consumed with attempting to meet their own needs. They do not understand that satisfaction and a feeling of belonging come from concern and action for the benefit of others. They are much too preoccupied with themselves.

The Hated Child

Hated or neglected children are currently much in the news. The media gives frequent press to child abuse, perhaps to an exaggerated degree because child abuse is a sensational news item. Pampered children, although not abused, believe that they have been neglected. Frequently, they express hate toward their mothers, who pampered them most. They believe that rather than doing too much for them, parents did not do enough for them. They hold that if parents would have done more for them, they would not have their current problems. Thus, pampered children express their hatred toward the pampering parent even into adulthood. Truly neglected or hated children may result from unwanted pregnancies, or prior unsuccessful marriages (Adler, 1969).

Children who have grown up without love feel defeated and they attempt to defeat others in return. They perceive the world as a place where everyone takes from others, and successful people are those who take the most. They feel that others have always attempted to use them and take from them. Drug use affords them with an excellent expression of anger and contempt toward the establishment.

Freedom from Responsibility

Van Kaam (1965) discussed the similarity between drug addiction and

play. In both, there is a freedom from responsibility, absence of rules, lack of concern for progress, and escape from goal attainment. Since there are no rules, there is no guilt while high on drugs. Time stands still like it does when playing. The difference between normal adolescents and drug abusing adolescents is the awareness that play has limits, and cannot occur on a full time basis. In time, normal adolescents understand that they will return to everyday existence. Drug bound adolescents desire indefinite satiation which will free them from the realities of work and responsibility to themselves and others.

Drug addicted adolescents continue the pampered child syndrome. Whatever it is that they desire they want immediately. The carefree existence and dependence on others is seized without realizing that with each request to lean upon someone else, drug addicted adolescents use drugs as a short cut to being above others. Even the term "high" reflects this striving to be superior to others.

Lombardi (1973) further illustrates drug abusers' self images and low self concepts by the terms that they use. "Crap," "garbage," "junk" and "dope" are lowly terms which fit drug users' low self esteem. The term "fix," which is associated with hard drugs such as heroin, connotes persons who are inadequate, in a state of disrepair and needing to be fixed.

Lack of Self Direction

Steffenhagen (1974) conducted research which demonstrated that drug users, particularly those who take hallucinogens, are excellent hypnotic subjects. Both hypnosis and drugs free adolescents from self responsibility and place the accountability for their actions outside of themselves. Rotter's (1954) concept of internal locus of control (I am in charge of my life) versus external locus of control (I am not in charge of my life) is helpful in describing well adjusted internally directed persons in contrast to drug abusing externally directed persons.

Well adjusted persons perceive their locus of control as being within the self. They accept responsibility for their lives and give direction to their behavior. Drug abusing adolescents place the locus of control in others. They are more easily swayed by peers, and less responsible in changing society because they are guided by input from others. Drug abusing adolescents do not make their own decisions. When the locus of control is within the self, people develop their own value system. When people are externally directed, they react to society. They lean on others, complain and constantly change values as they are easily molded by the opinions of their peers.

Drug abusers are reactors, not self governing persons. Drugs have freed them from having to reconcile values and their own behavior. They use drugs as an excuse for not behaving in a positive manner.

Parents

When parents realize their adolescents are using drugs, they are shocked, hurt and feel defeated. They don't know what to do. Therefore, they most typically try to control their adolescents with power and force. This is the same approach which the parents have tried in the past and which has failed so miserably. They threaten, plead, take away privileges, express their hurt and anger, and attempt to ground adolescents. Parents don't know what else to do, but these actions do not work (Dreikurs and Grey, 1970).

Parents are, oftentimes, the least able to help their drug abusing children. Often it has been the war between parents and children which has made drugs so attractive to adolescents. They can hurt parents, show them they can't be controlled, and make parents feel sorry for them by using drugs. When parents try to control adolescents, adolescents react by stiffening their backs and becoming more defiant. They may lie more and intensify the war with parents (Dreikurs, 1970).

Frequently, drug users believe that the parents have favored another sibling over them. Any attempts by parents to assist drug users are just seen as further parental abuse and attempts to control them.

An Effective Treatment

It is most effective to work with adolescents in group settings with other drug abusers (Dreikurs, 1960). Drug users have difficulty in forming close relationships with others because they manipulate people rather than giving and sharing with them. Groups afford drug abusers with the opportunity to belong and to obtain feedback.

Drug abusing adolescents think that no one has had the difficulties in life that they have experienced. Groups show them that they are not so unique. Early in treatment, counselors may appear to agree with adolescents that life has been cruel to them, and that parents have mistreated them. It is only later in successful treatment that abusers learn that they have control over their own destiny, and that blaming of parents and others has been an excuse to free themselves from accepting responsibility.

By listening and exhibiting genuine caring, counselors are seen as different from other adults. Counselors, with the aid of group members, help drug abusers to confront themselves with their own deceptive lies. Counselors and groups assist abusers in coming to the realization that only personal effort will bring genuine self worth, and drugs only impede progress. Group members are encouraged to seek and discuss natural highs. If they can relate to the idea of natural highs, they will find it easier to give up drugs.

Removal from the Home

For the adolescents who are addicted to heavy drugs, it is almost a necessity to get them out of their homes and into another setting. The pattern of struggles and wars with parents is too strong. Adolescents are asked if they would like to try to experiment by going without drugs for one week. In order to accomplish this, they need to stay with someone else. Adolescent drug abusers know that many drugs are addicting and people can't use them without becoming addicted. However, they believe that they are the exception. It is typical of the way they view themselves. They believe that they are special in most all respects. Therefore, of course, they believe that they can take addicting drugs without becoming addicted.

If they agree to the experiment, they are placed with another volunteer family for one week. If they are unable to stay clean for a week, they are now confronted by the peer counseling group with this fact. The excuses for using drugs are not accepted by the group. Since the group members have been through the same experiment, they are confronting their own realities as well as those of the other group member.

Once abusers have successfully avoided drugs for one week, they are asked to increase the experiment to one month of drug-free living. Depending upon the particular drug to which they have become addicted, it may now be possible for adolescents to return to their parents' home provided that parents have also been receiving training during this time. Parents are re-educated in methods of cooperating with and encouraging their drug abusing adolescents.

Further Group Treatment

After adolescents return to their homes, they continue group meetings with other drug abusers. At the same time that they are in their group meeting, the parents are meeting in groups with other parents to work through their frustrations and to continue to learn encouraging methods of parenting. These encouraging methods would include such suggestions as not getting into

struggles with the adolescent, e.g., leaving the room if the adolescent begins to argue; not pointing out the adolescent's negative behavior but instead letting the logical and natural consequences of the situation develop, e.g., if the adolescent fails to keep an appointment allow the individual with whom the adolescent had the appointment to deal with the problem. With the group's permission, about once each month the parents are allowed to sit in on the peer group meetings. They are not allowed to interact, but they do come to better understand their adolescents. This paper has reviewed a typical pattern for working with drug abusers. The specific program may vary depending upon the needs and circumstances of drug abusers and their families.

Summary

Drug abusing adolescents have probably been pampered children. They have not learned to depend upon their own capabilities. Since others have done for them what they could have done for themselves, they have become demanding and self centered. They do not believe that they can ever live up to their unrealistic idealized self image. They turn to drugs as a short cut to prestige and a feeling of belonging. Successful treatment for adolescents and parents requires re-education in a social setting.

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We would like to train for wisdom not knowledge. And what we are training for is knowledge, because we can measure it. But knowledge is not convertible, into human happiness and well-being. Wisdom is, because wisdom is learning how to live in harmony with the world . . .

— Ram Das
