

RIISING PROBLEM OF DRUG ADDICTION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Drugs of one sort or another have been used for a thousand years, either for medicinal, religious or recreational purposes and have had adverse effects on the physical, psychological, behavioural and social aspects of those who abuse them for just as long.

Drug addiction, also known as substance use disorder, is a complex progressive disease that causes people to lose control over the use of that substance despite having to suffer through worsening consequences because of increasing use, affecting the person's brain and behaviour and making it physically and mentally difficult to quit. It is a chronic disorder, rendering the individual prone to relapse and can be life-threatening if left untreated. Drug addiction has a cumulative effect on individuals, their families and communities and can be referred to as a worldwide epidemic.

Drug addictions usually start with the experimental use of recreational drugs, often in social situations. For some, drug addiction may begin as a consequence of being exposed to prescribed medications. People who have had stressful early life experiences, prenatal exposure to alcohol or other drugs are at a greater risk for addiction. Factors like the individual's genetic predispositions, stages of development, gender, ethnicity, the home environment, the influence of friends and other peers while growing up and whether the individual suffers from any mental illnesses or not also play a part in the risk of addiction.

Another factor that renders an individual at a greater risk for addiction is early drug abuse as this correlates to substance abuse problems later in life. Adolescents and young adults are especially vulnerable to substance abuse as their brains continue to grow and develop until they are around 25 years of age. 18-25 years is often the period of life where self-esteem and confidence is low and suggestibility is high. During this period unique challenges are presented, often involving a lot of stress leading to unhealthy coping mechanisms. Young people might indulge in drug use to fit in, to feel better, to do better in academics and sports, to experiment, due to environmental pressures etc. Since the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, which allows people to assess situations, make right decisions and keep emotions and desires under control hasn't fully developed yet, they are at an increased risk for trying drugs and continuing to take them. In this age group drug use may range from experimentation to severe substance use disorders. The usage of drugs when young can interfere with developmental processes occurring in the brain and affect their decision-making.

The teenage and young adult years are recognized as a period in development where the onset of behaviours and conditions not only affect health during that time but also lead to repercussions during the adult years. Not only does substance abuse in teenagers and young adults affect their growth and development-especially in the brain, but it can also result in the indulgence of risky behaviour such as having unprotected sex and reckless driving leading to increased morbidity and mortality and presenting major public health challenges. Adult health problems like heart disease, high blood pressure and sleep disorders could also be a result of teenage drug abuse. Areas of the brain that are critical for judgement, memory and behaviour control are changed, also affecting motivation and emotional development.

There also is a high correlation between mental health problems and substance abuse among young adults and adolescents. Studies show high rates of comorbid substance use disorders and anxiety disorders and other mental disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder, ADHD, psychotic illness, borderline personality disorder. Patients with schizophrenia have higher rates of alcohol, tobacco and drug use disorders than the general population. The usage of drugs as self-medication for mental illnesses may alleviate unwanted mental health symptoms like hopelessness, anxiety, irritability and negative thoughts for a short while. Substance-abusing youth are also at a higher risk than non-users for developing mental health problems, including depression, conduct problems, personality disorders etc.

Not only is drug addiction among young adults an issue at the individual or personal level but it is also a systemic issue. For example, vaping was introduced by companies as a healthier alternative to cigarettes for adults trying to quit but in recent years, it has been specifically marketed towards adolescents and young adults by repackaging nicotine into fancy devices with different flavours, appealing to the young adult crowd and in turn profiting off of it. Substance abuse could also lead to delinquency and arrest, adjudication and intervention by the juvenile justice system are eventual

consequences for many youth engaged in substance abuse. Although this could be seen as a method of further prevention of drug abuse and delinquency, it often does not address the root cause of drug abuse or present proper treatment options therefore not providing the individual with adequate help.

Like other disease, drug addictions can be prevented and treated. Prevention programs involving families, schools, communities and the media have been proven to prevent or reduce drug use and addiction and these programs include educations and outreach to help people understand the possible causes and consequences of drug use. Early identification, awareness and prevention programs must be prioritised and effective interventions and delivery platforms on enhancing social skills, problem-solving skills and self-confidence must be implemented. Treatments for drug addiction include detoxification, medicated assisted therapies and behaviour therapies.

Young adults are the future and as substances are more easily accessible now than they have been ever before, more and more young adults are suffering from substance abuse disorder. It is imperative that proper awareness programs are created and are exposed to young adults. They must be aware of the consequences of drug addiction and must have the option to make informed choices. Young adults should be provided with a safe space so that they feel comfortable asking for help and are able to overcome their addiction.

Authored by : This article is authored by Natasha Dsouza as part of the internship assignment.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are the authors own

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