
The Beacon

Guiding You through the Process of Change

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One More Drink So I Don't Need to Think

In a society where people have become accustomed to instant gratification, it might not be surprising that some people are not interested in putting in the effort and waiting for the benefits of psychotherapy or prescribed medication. Psychological treatment still carries a negative stigma for many people. There is actually a long history of using alcohol, drugs, food, sex, and other behaviors to try to elicit immediate relief from negative feelings or anxiety. In the short-term, self-medication can give the false impression that discomfort is gone or the issue has been eliminated, but research indicates that this is not the case. The original mental health problem is not only still present, but more problems can be created by these unhealthy coping strategies, including increased anxiety and/or depression, and development of substance abuse disorders.

The use of substances is the most common style of self-medication. Alcohol is commonly used due to easy access and its legal status for those 21 and older. Self-medication with alcohol might be used as a distraction from current stressors, but it does not result in the resolution of any problems. Due to the poor judgment that occurs while intoxicated, more problems can actually be created. Alcohol is also counterproductive for escaping negative emotions given that alcohol has a tendency to magnify existing uncomfortable feelings.

Marijuana has become increasingly used to cope with anxiety, especially with "decriminalization" in Connecticut. Marijuana can appear to temporarily help a person feel like they are escaping their problems, but the uneasiness returns after the drug effect wears off. Marijuana is also likely to reduce one's motivation, thus decreasing the likelihood of trying to resolve either the mental health issue or any problems that are contributing to the stressed feeling. Even though the legal consequences have been reduced in Connecticut, marijuana is still illegal and more severe punishments are still present in other states. Marijuana can also be

the gateway drug to the many other harmful drugs that people might turn to when the first substance is no longer providing the desired relief.

Although people can continue with their self-medicating behavior, it does not come without costs. The prolonged use of alcohol, drugs or over-eating can cause several types of physical health problems. There is also a lifetime financial expense to maintain the self-medication, which will vastly exceed the cost of proper treatment. Any drug use can also be the deciding factor in obtaining and maintaining employment. The ability to manage all responsibilities while finding the time to engage in these compensatory behaviors can also be a difficult task, which can create new challenges and exacerbate the distress.

Rather than relying on self-medication behaviors for short-term relief, psychotherapy can provide healthy coping skills, lifestyle changes, improved decision making, and an understanding of how past experiences play a role in one's current life. These psychological tools can be used to address the initial problems, as well as become prepared for future struggles. A person armed with the right tools will not only be better suited to tackle life's challenges, but also will be able to fully enjoy life's adventures.

References:

<http://psychcentral.com/news/2011/08/01/self-medicating-increases-risk-of-substance-abuse-problems/28251.html>

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