

## **Marijuana: Benign Herb or Dangerous Drug?**

by Patti D. Thomas, LCSW

*The following is an article I wrote which was published in the Times-Standard and is based on stories I have heard from clients over the years. Please note that most of the negative impacts from marijuana occur from daily, heavy use (i.e., people using all day, every day).*

I have followed the marijuana legalization debate with some interest. As a psychotherapist in Humboldt County for eleven years, I have worked increasingly with individuals who report negative impacts from their own pot use or that of someone close to them.

Numerous clients have described problems including: impaired judgment; inability to handle daily problems; anxiety; depression; short-term memory loss; and inability to concentrate or learn new tasks. In more extreme cases, people who were previously organized allow their living environment to become dirty and chaotic and neglect their personal appearance or hygiene. In unchecked cases, this has led to feelings of despair and alienation from others.

One area of particular concern is the inability to leave an unhealthy relationship which might expose the individual and his/her children to abuse or neglect. Couples may start out using pot only occasionally, then find it a convenient way to avoid conflicts. They begin to collude: "Instead of arguing, let's just get high." Once a pattern of avoidance becomes established, problems tend to build up over time. Since the couple has not developed problem-solving skills, they can slip into a discouraging cycle of hopelessness.

The majority of the individuals I work with have medical marijuana cards but admit to using far more of the drug than what is warranted for their condition. Some express that pot fails to ease the symptoms for which they received their 215 card. For instance, several patients have stated their depression has, in fact, worsened since being prescribed pot [for depression]. In addition to becoming dependent, they now have to contend with life quality issues such as lack of motivation or interest in previously enjoyable activities.

Contrary to what has been written regarding pot not being "physically addictive," clients who have attempted to quit describe symptoms such as headaches, stomach cramps, diarrhea, panic attacks, and irritability (sometimes escalating into rage) - classic substance withdrawal symptoms.

I have worked with people who turned down travel opportunities because their luggage might be checked by airport security. They limit their social contacts to others who smoke, even when they don't care for the company of those individuals. They are under- or unemployed, because jobs better suited to their education or training would require drug testing. Instead, they stay in dead-end, low-paying jobs which exacerbate their already poor quality of life.

All of these "straight from the horses' mouths" accounts have convinced me: marijuana abuse can cause serious, debilitating problems. Decisions regarding legalization cannot afford to overlook or minimize these important psychological and emotional concerns.