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Why Using Marijuana to Cope with Anxiety Might Not Actually Work

Our Friends · Monday, June 12th, 2023

Marijuana is becoming increasingly more available throughout the United States. Minnesota recently became the 24th state to fully legalize marijuana and medical marijuana is legal in another 16 states. Only four states have laws that make it completely illegal.

At the same time, the prevalence of people diagnosed with anxiety disorder is rising. Some of them are looking to marijuana as a treatment option with a prescription or without one in recreational-use states.

Although it may seem like marijuana would mellow an anxious mood, that isn't always the case. Moreover, there could be many reasons why using it to cope with anxiety may not work. In fact, it could do more harm than good. Here are a few reasons why you should reconsider using marijuana in your search for serenity.

Marijuana Is Not FDA-Approved

Marijuana has not received approval from the Food and Drug Administration as a treatment for anxiety. In fact, marijuana is not FDA-approved to treat any health condition or disorder. It is still listed as a Schedule I drug under the federal Control Substances Act. Schedule I drugs are so categorized due to their psychoactive effects and the lack of approved medical use.

Sure, physicians are providing medical marijuana cards right and left to patients suffering from anxiety disorder. But the drug has not undergone the research, clinical trials, and scrutiny to be approved for medical use. Instead, evidence that marijuana may effectively treat anxiety is largely anecdotal rather than based on science.

The good news is that there are numerous anxiety treatment prescription medications that have received approval from the FDA. That means there's sufficient evidence that the drugs work for that purpose and their benefits outweigh the risks of taking them.

Safety and effectiveness are two thresholds required to receive FDA approval. Those are thresholds marijuana simply has not crossed.

The CBD-THC Ratios Are Problematic

Cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) are the two of the some 500 chemical

substances in marijuana. CBD is not psychoactive, so it doesn't make you high, and it appears to have some therapeutic properties. THC is what makes you high and what gives marijuana the potential to be habit-forming.

CBD is the component most likely to lower anxiety. Among the limited related research is a study that shows CBD may help anxiety at any dosage. THC, on the other hand, may help in low doses but can cause anxiety in higher doses.

So, maybe marijuana with a higher CBD-to-THC ratio could be an effective treatment? Unfortunately, the amount of THC bred into marijuana has been rising since the 1990s, and the higher the THC, the lower the CBD.

Knowing what the CBD-THC ratio is among products at a dispensary can be confusing. States that have legalized marijuana for medical or recreational use operate under their own laws, creating a patchwork of labeling standards. Unlike using FDA-approved medications, knowing for certain the content of marijuana products is a risk for the consumer.

Marijuana Puts You at Risk for Substance Abuse

The scientific debate about marijuana as a gateway drug continues. Whether someone begins abusing other substances after starting with marijuana use involves multiple factors. The age at which someone began using, environmental issues, biological tolerance, and even gender may affect this propensity. Studies also show starting with alcohol or even nicotine may yield the same results.

There is evidence that those using marijuana to treat social anxiety disorder (SAD) are more likely to develop marijuana dependence. Moreover, self-medicating with marijuana may help in the short-term but lead to abuse of other substances over time.

It is also accurate that long-term use of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) can lead to dependence, which would cause withdrawal symptoms if discontinued. But SSRIs moderate feelings of anxiety and depression. They don't cause euphoria or a "high" like marijuana with sufficient THC content does. It's the high that can lead to cannabis use disorder, which may or may not lead to abusing other substances.

CBD does not have the psychoactive properties of THC and related cannabis chemicals. So, if you use marijuana containing more CBD than THC, you might reduce any "gateway" potential. The point is that no one knows for sure.

You'll Likely Fail a Drug Test

Absent federal laws protecting employees partaking in marijuana, those who use it legally or illegally may still lose their jobs. Even in California, which legalized medical marijuana in the 1990s, employers can still reprimand and fire employees who test positive for THC. And THC can show up for weeks or even months after you use marijuana.

Your liver processes THC, releasing some into the bloodstream and breaking down the rest. Depending on how often and how much you use, your liver may not break it down as fast as you accumulate it. When this occurs, the psychoactive component is stored in fatty tissues where it lingers for a while.

Some anxiety medications, like SSRIs, have been known to generate false positives for other substances. For example, Sertraline (Zoloft) may cause a false positive for benzodiazepines.

If your FDA-approved anxiety medication causes a false positive, you can advise the lab and retake the test. If THC shows up in your system, you could lose your job or be eliminated from employment consideration.

Take the Surer Path

Anxiety is a serious mental health issue. Although many who suffer from it are trying marijuana as a treatment, there is little long-term research to support that route. Use of prescribed FDA-approved medications combined with psychotherapy is the well-studied path to treating your anxiety. You might want to take it.

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