

# LINE ON LIFE

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## Too Much Holiday Cheer? \*

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Between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day seems to be the season for holiday cheer. However, to gain this "*cheer*," many drink some beer, others take a "*toke*" or even some "*coke*." Why do people use drugs? Can anything be done to keep them from abusing drugs?

People seek drug experiences for a variety of reasons. A few of these are curiosity, a desire to belong to a group, a search for meaning or an escape from feelings of inadequacy. Many abusers turn to drugs in a self-defeating attempt to cope with life. Drugs produce immediate feelings of pleasure, but negative consequences follow only much later. However, in time, most of the pleasure goes out of drug abuse, and the abuser's problems get worse. As long as the abuser *feels* better – however briefly – after taking the drug, taking drugs becomes compulsive.

There is a widespread tendency to think of drugs as a magic way to produce good feelings. Drug use is so ingrained in our society that some observers say, "*We are addicted to addiction.*" This indicates that – with few exceptions – we assume that life cannot be lived without drugs. "*We should be able to will ourselves to be calm, cheerful, thin, industrious, creative – and moreover, to have a good night's sleep.*" The medical profession – well meaning but misguided – seems to accept this view and unnecessarily encourages legal drug use. In a 1971 article in *Psychology Today*, one psychologist remarked:

*Depression, social inadequacy, anxiety, apathy, marital discord, children's misbehavior, and other psychological and social problems of living are now being redefined as medical problems, to be resolved by physicians with prescription pads.*

The reliance on drugs of physicians and the public is partially due to them being the target of multi-million-dollar advertising campaigns by drug companies. Even the lowly aspirin is now pushed as a means of relieving "*nervous tension*." Advertisements aimed at physicians encourage overuse even more blatantly. For example, one ad shows an upset mother with her child and asks, "*Her kind of pressure lasts all day...shouldn't her tranquilizer?*"

Of course, drugs have legitimate uses and have relieved much suffering. However, the same drugs that effectively help also have high potential for abuse. Abuse problems – once related to the drug subcultures or the urban poor – are now seen in the middle classes, even among school children.

Traditional approaches at prevention have emphasized limiting drug supplies, stricter law enforcement and stronger legal penalties. A major problem with law enforcement is that drug abuse and the legality of a drug are *two separate issues*. This becomes clear, if you can recognize that the most destructive drug available is **alcohol**. By the government's own standards, alcohol should be at the top of the list of controlled substances. Yet it is legal.

Anyone who seeks drug-induced consciousness alteration will find a drug – legal or illegal – to achieve it. Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz believes it is futile to attempt to "*legislate morality*" by legally regulating what drugs a person may take. Szasz suggests that current drug laws have effects similar to prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s. They encourage the black market, organized crime and disrespect for law. As Szasz points out, the government's position is confusing.

*"Tobacco is not legally considered a drug, marijuana is, gin is not, but Valium is...."*

After much research on drugs, even *Consumer Reports* magazine agreed the Szasz's conclusion. As early as 1972, Consumer Reports added this recommendation:

*"Stop misclassifying drugs. Our current legal classification treats alcohol and nicotine – two of the most harmful drugs – essentially as nondrugs, while marijuana is equated with heroin – a shocking and harmful bit of foolishness. Cocaine is listed as a narcotic, when it is clearly a stimulant. A scientifically based legal system must replace the current politically based one."*

In general, Americans tend to overlook the frequent abuse of legal drugs (alcohol and tranquilizers) and overestimate the use of illegal drugs. Even with stricter penalties and law enforcement, drugs are almost always available. Although billions of dollars have been spent on drug enforcement, there has been an increase in the overall level of drug use in the United States.

My suggestion for holiday cheer will not stop drug abuse, but it might reduce it a little. If you are feeling a little "*down*" during this season (or any time), take my substitute for drugs. The "*high*" can be just as good or better, and you are less likely to have unwanted side effects. Of course, it might be addicting, but repeated doses can be inexpensively obtained.

Along with other people, I advertise this alternative on the bumper of my car – ***Use hugs, not drugs***. If you believe that others (whom you like) might not hug you, you could hug them. Remember, when you give a hug, you almost always get a hug in return.

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\* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1986, pages 170-171.