

Addiction

The Science of Substance Abuse & the Search For a Cure



Home

Foreword

Drug Demons in History

Genetics of Addiction

Neuroaddiction

New Medicine

Does AA Work?

Harm Reduction

Site Map



Harm Reduction

"They were so young, they were smokin' cigarettes."

—Patty Larkin

Genes are about risk, not about destiny. All drug use is not abuse; all drug abuse is not addiction. Statistics teach us that the casual use of illegal drugs falls off drastically after the age of 35. We could even suggest this hypothesis: People in their 40s and 50s who do use illegal drugs regularly are quite possibly addicted to them.

If we take what we know about impulsive behavior and add it to what we have learned about carbohydrate craving, we can begin to sketch a theoretical profile of young people who may be possible candidates for future drug trouble. We cannot yet be certain that what we are identifying is a tendency to become addicted, rather than simply a desire to experiment and rebel. Current youth programs treat all young people as if they are at equal risk. Distinctions of this nature, which it is now possible to make, are in danger of being lost in the fog of perpetual drug wars.

Considering the fact that most addictive drugs score such a direct hit on the reward pathways in the human brain, it seems logical to wonder whether anyone could be truly "protected" against the ravages of addiction. The insidious alteration of neurotransmitter levels seems to imply that anyone who uses these drugs would end up unfailingly addicted—or else nobody would. Yet, most people understand that daily drinkers are not necessarily addicted to alcohol. Frequency of use and amount of intake, as we have seen, are not infallible indicators of addiction. This is easy to understand when the subject is booze, for such users are all around us. However, many of these same people have trouble extending that perspective to heroin, cocaine, and marijuana. The whole idea of so-called "hard" drugs may not, in the end, shed much more light on the process of addiction than does the attempt to make distinctions between physical addiction and psychological addiction.

A great deal of the confusion is semantic. To paraphrase former president Clinton, it depends on what your definition of "addiction" is. This book is an attempt to update the definition of addiction in light of recent research. The metaphor with which this book began—the search for an "insulin shot" against addiction—is getting closer to reality. Certainly there will be addicts for whom the anti-craving drug, or the vaccine, will be enough. Breaking the grip of craving, or blocking the euphoriant effect of the drug for a period of time, will enable some people to gain sufficient traction for a run at abstinence. There are marvelous breakthroughs in the making. There has never been a better time in history to attempt breaking free.

On the other hand, John Walters, the drug czar under George W. Bush, appears content to stay the course. He has denounced the idea that addiction treatment has any kind of central role to play in the national drug war. Mr. Walters favors—can you guess?—stricter law enforcement and greater interdiction efforts at U.S. borders.

Drug wars never work. No amount of Viet Nam-style escalation or sheer military firepower is capable of preventing people from getting their hands on illegal drugs. Addicts always know how to find the drugs, even when finding them requires an enormous amount of time, effort, and money. Drug wars tend to increase prices in the short run, which theoretically makes the product less available. But there is a catch. "Cocaine isn't scarce and can't be made scarce," argues Mark A.R. Kleiman of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. "Thus we can't create a shortage because Adam Smith is more powerful than [former drug czar] William Bennett." Writing in the *New Republic*, Kleiman argues that none of the "currently fashionable approaches to increasing the price of cocaine imports—eradication, substitution, pre-emptive buying, or interdiction—have any prospect of doubling import prices." Kleiman believes this is equally true of "techno-thriller approaches such as releasing coca-eating caterpillars," a strategy which once made the rounds as a topic of discussion in Washington, D.C.

"It is obvious by now that we can't keep illegal aliens out, and an alien is substantially harder to hide than a kilogram of cocaine," Kleiman wrote. "Every time we seize a kilogram of cocaine, someone in Colombia sells another kilogram to the importers. From the viewpoint of the South American drug lords, a kilogram seized is about as good as a kilogram snorted or smoked."

Alcohol and nicotine inflict more damage than all illicit drugs combined. We know this already, but we don't really let this knowledge mean anything. Back in 1990, while the U.S. government was continuing to pour time and energy into the battle

knowledge mean anything. Back in 1990, while the U.S. government was continuing to pour time and energy into the battle with Colombian drug cartels, Philip Morris, the U.S. corporation, announced an agreement to supply the Soviet Union with a minimum of 20 billion cigarettes annually—the largest single export order in the company's history.

The government's own studies estimate that fully 50 per cent of all legal alcohol purchased in the United States is consumed by only 10 per cent of the drinking population. This suggests that practicing alcoholics may account for as much as half of the total liquor sales in the nation. It is little wonder, then, that certain alcoholic beverage manufacturers were only too happy to offer cheap, high-alcohol wines like Thunderbird and Night Train—fortified wines that some health authorities maintain are nothing more than “designer drugs” for poverty-stricken, late-stage alcoholics. And then there are the newer teen drinks; starter kits for amateur drinkers.

The category called illegal addictive drugs is no longer a sustainable myth. Stephen Jay Gould, the best-selling Harvard professor of paleontology, argued in *Dissent* that the drug crisis is best understood as a taxonomy problem:

“For reasons that are little more than accidents of history, we have divided a group of nonfood substances into two categories: items purchasable for supposed pleasure (such as alcohol) and illicit drugs.... Too rarely, in our political criticism, do we look to false taxonomies, particularly to improper dichotomies, as the basis for inadequate analysis. Our drug crisis is largely the product of such a false dichotomy.”

[>> Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) - [Foreword](#) - [Drug Demons in History](#) - [Neuroaddiction](#) - [New Medicine](#) - [AA](#) - [Harm Reduction](#) - [Site Map](#)

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