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Psychology and Substance Abuse

Drugs are a big problem for many people in the world. Even though most people would agree that drugs are not health and are bad for humans, why do people continue to use and abuse drugs? Thanks to the field of psychology we can see that drug abuse is not as simple as some people think at first glance. Things such as addiction and altered brain chemistry as well as social influences all play big roles in the lives of those people who abuse and use drugs. I believe that there are many small parts that influence the use of drugs and make it hard to stop using them and all these little aspects from the field of psychology add up and make it a very daunting and difficult life for those suffering from drug abuse.

The first factor that I want to introduce is the biological aspect that aids drug abuse. Biology is important to psychologists because it offers some explanation to certain behaviors that aren’t learned but rather passed down from our parents or “built in” in our body. Different parts of our brain are responsible for different functions and so abusing different substances can lead to drastically different effects, depending on what parts of the brain are affected. Sometimes outside things alter our biological makeup like in the case of Phineas Gage and the railroad spike destroying a part of his brain causing him to turn from a good, caring man to an unreliable and angry one. Sometimes we alter our own biology by using drugs that flood our brains with certain chemicals causing good feelings but also causing our bodies to stop producing that specific chemical meaning that the only way to get that chemical into our system would be to do the drug repeatedly. Also, the amount of a drug someone does has different effects on the body. In the case of alcohol, the outside parts of the brain become affected first such as the occipital lobe, responsible for vision, and the frontal lobe, responsible for decision making. If someone continues adding more alcohol into their body, the inside brain structures start getting affected such as the brainstem, responsible for vital functions such as breathing and consciousness. The hindrance by drugs of certain functions of the human brain if a good reason biology is an important part in understanding substance abuse.

Another factor that can help us understand drug abuse is sensation and perception. As mentioned above, drugs do affect the brain and the parts of the brain that let us sense things and try to understand the world around us. When neuron receptors are blocked from receiving information from our body parts, we can easily hurt ourselves and others around us because we cannot understand what is going on around us. For example, if our hearing is affected, either by damage to the temporal lobe or by damage to the ears, we would have big trouble hearing and sensing things that are coming from behind and would have to rely heavily one other senses such as touch to fell vibrations of say a train horn rather than hearing the horn blare and connecting it in our minds to an incoming train. Also, drugs impair our cognitive and sensory processes. A drunk person can try walking up to a tiger and try petting it because in his state of mind they would think of it and prosses it as a fluffy cat instead of a huge and dangerous wild animal. These examples go to show that it is important to have our senses alert and not clouded by drugs and their effects to assure our personal wellbeing and the safety of others.

Consciousness, or the awareness of ourselves, is also important in understanding how drug abuse affects the users. There are many ways that we can change and manipulate our own consciousness and even the consciousness of others. Sleep and meditation are good and even healthy ways our consciousness can be changed because out body gets a chance to form memories and repair itself while we are asleep. Also, from an evolutionary perspective, sleeping at night helped the humans survive by keeping them out of the way of predators stalking prey outside in the dark. Drugs also alter consciousness of people but unlike sleep, the loss and change of consciousness because of drugs is not healthy and can even lead to serious problems later in life. These problems can range from anger issues to loss of interest in ordinary daily activities to even death in extreme cases. Understanding how consciousness affects drug users is important because it allows those trying to help and understand those who suffer from abuse to and try to help them appropriately.

Another big part in psychology that is helpful in understanding substance abusers is learning. Learning is a powerful and very diverse method that can make drugs hard to refuse for those that fell into their powerful grasp. Classical conditioning can be used to explain the behavior of some drug users. For example, if a socially active college has lots of friends and enjoys their company, the unconditioned stimulus is talking and interacting with friends and the unconditioned response is pleasure and happiness. However, if the student is convinced to take drugs while hanging out with his friends, he will eventually start associating drugs and happiness together meaning that the conditioned stimulus would be drugs and the conditioned response would the perceived happiness from drugs. This will eventually cause the student to do more and harder drugs to search for that pleasure causing him to develop an addiction. Skinner’s operant conditioning can also be used to try and figure out why people do drugs. Operant conditioning in its basic form is that we do things which we are rewarded for and do not do things that punish us. Going back to the previous example of the college student, if his friends accept him and let him be part of the group because he does drugs with them, the student will be much more likely to do drugs again to feel accepted and to have his friends happy. If the friends would have reacted negatively and threatened to end their friendship with him for doing drugs or if the student would have fallen sick after doing drugs, he would most likely not do drugs and never develop and addiction because the consequences of his drug use was negative and unpleasant. Learned helplessness can also have a huge impact on drug users. If the user has tried and failed to quit doing drugs on their own, they will just accept their addiction and would not consider going to rehab and getting help from legitimate and helpful institutions that could help them just because they accepted that if they cannot help themselves, then no one can help them. Albert Bandura’s social and observational learning can also cause people to develop substance abuse problems. If kids and teens constantly see their favorite actors and movie stars doing drugs and seemingly not have any negative consequences from it, it can influence the teens to do try and do drugs themselves because their role models have done so too, and this will consequently develop a drug problem. Understanding different types of learning can help understand how and why some people fall into the trap of abuse of different harmful substances.

Cognition, or our mental activity, can also be used to try and understand substance abuse. The brain of a drug addict obviously works differently and has different thought processes when compared to a person not suffering from substance abuse. One reason some people start doing drugs is to solve problems in their lives. Well-defined problems have one specific answer to them, like a math problem. However, most problems people encounter in real life are ill-defined, meaning they have many different paths to a solution and one of those “paths” can be drugs for some people. Some judgements we make can also lead us to create a substance abuse problem. If a well-dressed man tells us to take some pills for a head ache, we are much more likely to listen to him than if a child or random stranger at a supermarket told us the same thing. This judgment isn’t based on any good logic but only on what we think. Also, those who do drugs may try and comfort themselves by using and searching statistics that diminish the impact of drugs on the body and ignore and question those that claim drugs are bad. This is called confirmation bias. Also, cognitive dissonance can play a role. A user of drugs can say: “well I know Bob, and he has been doing meth for 10 years and he is still alive. I’ll be fine, I’ve only used it for one year.” to try and calm his conscience or he may look at Bob’s life and decide that drugs ruined his marriage and job and that the person won’t do drugs anymore. These types of actions and behavior can cause the user to associate unrelated things, as described in the paragraph above on learning, and lead to the person truly believing that drugs are the only answer in life. Understanding that drug users may not think in the same way that we do about drugs is important if we want to understand substance abuse in greater clarity.

Drug abusers do not only hurt themselves, but their abuse can also reflect on the development of their kids and their own development. Drug abusing parent would most likely be negligent and cause their children to develop mistrust instead of trust at an early age. Also, the kids of drug abusing parents would probably see themselves as being in the way and will be shameful and doubtful and try to keep away from such parents. This would then go on to cause them to feel inferior to other kids their age because the parents are too concerned about doing drugs to take care of their children. Of course, such negligence and mistreatment of the children will cause them to grow up lonely and have trouble having feelings for others. It can also lead the now-grown kids to get into drugs themselves since life is already miserable for them. It is safe to say that if these kids also fall into drugs, they will never settle down and start their own families. Drug abuse of pregnant mothers can also cause the children to be born already disadvantaged with health problems. Cognitive development may come later for these kids than for there normal and health counterparts from health parents. Understanding how the development works in the life of a substance abuser can offer answers to why their children act the way they do and maybe make us feel sympathetic instead of judgmental.

Being in groups can also influence people to do things they normally wouldn’t do. Social psychology can also explain why some people go to drugs as they are influenced by others around them. Most people when in a large group try to keep in agreement. This is called Group think and so that one person that has never done drugs but when placed with a group of druggies, he will also do drugs to try and keep in agreement. Being in this group would also cause the person to not take the reasoning against drugs as seriously as if he was on his own. Another influence of groups is they tend to polarize and when the counter arguments are not considered against drugs to keep from disagreeing, then the group will go further into the substance abuse than most individuals from that group would have done so on their own. Also, since people like to hang around others like them, once a person starts doing drugs, they will start hanging out with others like them causing them to continue their abuse of substances and maybe even try more different drugs. Even if someone doesn’t necessarily want to do drugs, being in a group of drug users would push him to conform to the norm of using drugs. As mentioned previously, the way we judge others can also make us more likely or less likely to listen to them if they were to offer drugs to us. Understanding how groups and others influence the behavior of drug users can offer important insight into how and why people act in certain ways that we don’t understand right away.

As I stated in the very beginning, while some people can have one factor affect their substance abuse more that that other factor affects another person, substance abuse can not be described as caused by one specific thing but rather a combination of all the factors I have stated above. The different factors contribute their own little thing to the big problem of drug abuse. So, while social psychology might be helpful to explain why someone might do drugs at a party, developmental psychology is much more helpful in explaining why the quality of families and children are below the normal expectation for average people. Connecting the contribution from each factor of psychology can help us fully and completely understand substance abuse and how it affects the user, the people around the user, and the future of the user.