

# Drugs And Mental Illness – *What's the Big Deal?*

*Illicit drugs are widely used in our community, especially by young people. Around 25% of teenagers have used cannabis. Among 12-24 year olds, 7% took amphetamines in the last year, and a similar number used ecstasy ... What effect is this having on our mental health? And what can be done to stop the damage?*

## do drugs contribute to mental illness?

Drug use as a teenager is a major risk factor for a range of mental illnesses – the evidence is particularly strong for the link between cannabis and psychotic illnesses such as schizophrenia.

As expert Dr Dan Lubman explains in this issue 37 of *SANE News*, regular cannabis use as a teenager doubles your chances of developing schizophrenia. Use in the teenage years is also associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety later in life.

It is a particular concern that cannabis use is starting at a younger age, increasing the period of exposure during the brain's crucial developmental stage in adolescence. An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study shows that in 2004, over 25% of 14-19 year olds had already used the drug.

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the incidence of amphetamine-related psychosis, according to Paul Dillon of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre in Sydney.

Ecstasy is also associated with long-term mental health problems. 'Media reports are often sensationalized and focus on deaths associated with ecstasy, rather than the far more common effects such as increased risk of depression and memory problems,' says Paul.

## what action is needed?

People affected by drugs and mental illness need treatment and support – not criminalization – with education as a critically important preventative measure.

'It's just not a good idea to smoke dope at that age,' says Samantha, 20, who has a diagnosis of psychosis and has used cannabis herself in the past. 'Apart from increasing the risk, you don't need all that extra pressure,' she says.

'Education is crucial,' says Paul Dillon. 'We need to develop clear, credible, easily-understandable messages about drugs and mental illness that young people will understand and act on.'

'There's no magic bullet in this area,' he warns, 'and solving these problems will take time and effort. Responding too quickly with a "Get Tough" approach can actually be counter-productive.'

As well as a major public education initiative in this area, there is also a need for integrated and better-coordinated drug and mental health services – working together rather than handballing clients from one to the other. As 48.5% of people with psychotic illnesses report having used illicit drugs (according to the National Mental Health Survey), then health departments should reflect this in planning and service delivery.

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## Where to find help

If you are concerned about your drug use, or that of someone you know, take the first step by asking for information and help.

◆ Ask your GP: Make an appointment to talk to a doctor if you're worried about mental health problems caused by drug use. Ask for a longer appointment to allow time to talk, make some notes beforehand if possible, and be completely open and honest about what concerns you. The doctor can make an assessment and give a referral for specialist treatment.

◆ Call the SANE Helpline - it is a confidential, national Freecall service, offering info and referral on mental illness and related issues: 1800 18 SANE. Helpline Advisors can answer questions about drug use and mental illness, send out information, and refer to specialist drug and alcohol services.

◆ Visit the SANE Bookshop at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org) for details of *The SANE Guide to Drugs and Mental Illness* which contains information and tips for those affected.

Read Brett's blog ... and download a factsheet on Cannabis and psychotic illness at [www.itsallright.org](http://www.itsallright.org) - the SANE website for young people in families affected by mental illness

