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In Defense of Substance Shaming

The issues of both drugs and of addiction are deeply complex, and the many causes of substance abuse must not be conflated. In attempting to combat America's growing opioid crisis we must be empathetic towards those who suffer from addiction but changing the connotations of substance abuse would cause more harm than good. Though the operational definition of substance abuse may carry with it negative connotations, these undertones work to deter individuals from choosing to use drugs at a certain point.

Ultimately there is a point where an individual makes a definite choice to do so, despite the many circumstances that affect that choice. Society's harsh definition of drug abuse acts as a deterrent to protentional drug users. Stigmatizing addiction causes any given person to think twice before taking drugs. Many factors may affect a person's given likelihood to use drugs, from where someone lives, to the socioeconomic status of a family, or whether or not a person even has a family at all.

But one key factor that must not be taken away is the social stigma surrounding addicts and drug abuse. In today's world, being addicted to heroin is not only bad for one's health, it is also criminally uncool. When falling to a life of addiction one becomes a societal outcast. To alter our definition so that we would think of drug addicts in a more understanding light would be to remove this very important social factor. This pressure from society is paramount to preventing people from getting trapped by addiction. The idea that substance abuse is shameful

is instilled at a very young age. It is taught so ubiquitously that “don’t do drugs” has become a cliché phrase to tell children alongside “eat your vegetables” and “stay in school.” We say these things because there is a consensus among people that school and vegetables are good for you, and that drugs are bad for you. In destigmatizing drug addiction society contradicts itself, and because of it individuals may make regrettable choices.

There are few definite benefits to altering the meaning of substance abuse to be kinder to those who are victims of addiction. One flaw with the current stigma towards drug users described by my previous paper was the unfair laws that we use on drug abusers including minimum sentencing. These laws were put in place largely because of President Nixon’s War on Drugs, a campaign with motivations beyond the scope of drugs alone, and the operational definition of substance abuse likely had little to do with the creation of these laws. This previous paper also concluded that altering the definition of the phrase “substance abuse” would also cause there to be more resources and support for addicts. What wasn’t considered is that there already a great deal of resources for people trying to overcome addiction. There are rehabilitation centers, and organizations that act as support groups for those trying to be sober. The desire to escape addiction acts, in some ways, as one of the only barriers to getting the help one needs.

It is impractical to try to alter the way society defines substance abuse, because all of these preconceived notions about drug addiction that are instilled from a very young age. These views of addiction may in fact help deter individuals from using drugs at a point in time. The changing of the phrase is unnecessary because resources already exist for those who seek to escape an addiction. Though doctors may be able to treat addiction as a chronic illness, we are a long way away from society being able to see anything other than a moral failing.