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### The True Meaning of “Substance Abuse”

From the elderly, to the homeless, and even to today’s pop culture icons, drugs find their way into many corners of society. Some individuals need substances for medical purposes, but there are many who form an addiction to drugs. This addiction is devastating in the lives of addicts and those closest to them. In the discourse surrounding drug abuse, there is often little empathy for the individuals who are using the drugs. This is because of how society defines drug abuse and addiction. To take action towards helping people, people must first be invested in the issue. With the widespread disdain that society holds toward addicts there is no incentive to try improving the lives of these people. By changing the meaning of drug abuse from something criminal, to one with more understanding connotations, we will villainize these individuals to a lesser extent, opening the doors to solve the crisis at large. Society must define substance abuse as a disease, rather than a crime, so that prevention and rehabilitation will be more effective, because it will focus less on blaming drug abusers and focus more on working towards a solution to the problem.

The meaning of substance abuse is well understood, but its clinical definition does not entirely reveal the preconceived notions that exist surrounding the subject. Merriam-Webster defines substance abuse as “Excessive use of a drug (such as alcohol, narcotics, or cocaine): [or the] use of drugs without medical justification.” (Merriam-Webster 2018) This definition

transparently outlines the act of abusing drugs but does not capture the widespread perspective surrounding substances and those that fall prey to their incessant grasp.

Our current view of these actions is a particularly reprehensible one. Many see homeless individuals begging on the street for money and the first assumption they make is that they just want to buy drugs. Oftentimes society portrays addicts as rather pathetic people who simply lack the self-control and the discipline required to quit, like they are not strong enough to forego the next high. This fails to take into consideration the strong characteristics of physical withdrawals and the gradual tolerance that make it nearly impossible for individuals to escape a life of needles and pills.

These unforgiving views are represented within our laws as well. For many drugs that are considered dangerous and illegal, minimum sentences have been put into place, meaning judges are not allowed to determine the severity of a drug crime. Instead judges are forced by law to give decades of prison time to certain individuals regardless of whether or not their crime warrants such a punishment. These laws are indicative of how society views drugs at large. Because of this extreme perspective, our laws surrounding the issue often prove senseless. With an unrealistic societal definition of substance abuse comes unreasonable laws regarding drug abuse.

Media holds drug addicts in similar regard. Many films and television shows portray drug abusing individuals as selfish people with very poor judgement. One example of this is “Requiem for a Dream”, a film that shows the lives of four different individuals as their lives spiral out of control due to addiction. The movie reinforces the idea that drug abusers are failures, and that their flaws overcome any ambitions they may have had. Movies such as this one reflect the existing stigma surrounding substance abuse, and even provoke further

condemnation of victims of addiction. Between the current understanding of substance abuse, the law, and the media, the idea that addicts do not deserve, nor desire help is perpetuated in many parts of society. This judgement is detrimental to positive progress.

Empathy plays a critical role in issues where people are in need of help. When speaking about the issue of refugees who have fled their countries to escape terrible conflict, the empathy we hold towards them directly affects how we approach the issue and come to a solution. We cannot simply assume that refugees bring violence, terrorism, and ill-will to any country they enter. First of all, this assumption would be false, and secondly, viewing these people in such a way would leave them stranded at country borders with nowhere to go. Similarly, we must understand victims of addiction before implementing policy to combat the disorder. In order to help people, we must first understand them and actually *want* to help them.

Today there is little empathy for addicts in society. Research from John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health looked into how people perceive both mental disorders and drug addictions, comparing the two. In the words of the study leader, “While drug addiction and mental illness are both chronic, treatable health conditions, the American public is more likely to think of addiction as a moral failing than a medical condition.” In regard to drug addicts in the workplace, many respondents said that they would not want to work with an addict and would be unlikely to consider hiring one. (Benham 2014) Studies, such as this one, portray how people hold many notions about substance abuse and drug addiction. People disdain drug addicts and want to keep them at a safe distance. This stigma is emblematic of what substance abuse truly means to most people, and it shows that the operational definition of substance abuse fails to convey that addiction is more of an illness than it is a character flaw.

The meaning behind the words used in regard to substance abuse directly affects people's perspectives. When abuse is defined by a loss of self-control and a massive danger to society, there are no resources created to help rehabilitate drug addicts. If drug users are the prominent victim of these crimes, then we must approach these individuals from a place of understanding. When using the word "abuse", people associate addicts with individuals who use physical violence against loved ones. In reality, drug abusers often do not harm anyone other than themselves. Not only must the societal definition of substance abuse change, but the wording of the phrase should be altered slightly in order to paint addicts in a less sinister light.

However, some argue that the connotations that exist around substance abuse exist for a reason. Though many factors may affect a person's given likelihood to use drugs, and although once an addiction is formed it is often impossible to escape, ultimately there is a point where an individual makes a choice to use substances. Society's harsh definition of drug abuse acts as a deterrent to potential drug users. Stigmatizing addiction causes any given person to think twice before taking drugs. This argument is valid to a certain extent, but if this definition of substance abuse hinders our ability to provide resources to help people, then it is likely more harmful than it is productive.

Society must alter the meaning of substance abuse, so that its undertones may be more compassionate. Currently addicts are understood to be selfish, undisciplined, criminals. Changing the meaning of substance abuse to a more sympathetic one may inspire punitive measures to be replaced by rehabilitative ones. Though the connotations of the phrase may deter some individuals from falling to the trappings of addiction, it comes at the cost of producing a productive solution to America's vast drug crisis. With a new definition fewer people may find themselves devastated by a life of addiction.

Works Cited

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