

Frequent Marijuana Use and Mental Health

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance abuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 21 public and private colleges and universities in the state that work to decrease high-risk behaviors among college students by implementing strategic plans for prevention utilizing evidence-based strategies. To measure progress and obtain data, PIP conducts the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey implemented each spring to assess the impact that alcohol, drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco, interpersonal violence, and mental health issues have on student health and wellness. This brief will examine mental health concerns of students who frequently use marijuana, defined as using marijuana 3 or more times a week.

Background

Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug among college students in the United States with 39% reporting that they had used marijuana in the past year.¹ Research indicates that marijuana use has adverse health effects on developing brains and can increase the risk of developing substance use disorders.² Regular marijuana use is associated with an increased risk of anxiety and depression, but no causal link has been determined.² Additionally, relatively few longitudinal studies have examined the long-term consequences of adolescent marijuana use on mental health.

According to the 2018 MACHB, 31% of Missouri college students have used marijuana in the past year. Around 3.2% of students report using marijuana 3 or more times a week, and 3.5% of students report using daily; thus, approximately 6.7% of Missouri college students are frequent marijuana users.

Marijuana Use and Stress

The MACHB asks students to report their levels of stress over the past 2 weeks and how that stress has impacted their academic and personal lives. Frequent marijuana users were more likely to report that they had experienced stress that was overwhelming or unbearable at higher rates than students who do not use marijuana. Thirty-eight percent of frequent marijuana users indicated such stress, compared

to 28% of non-users. Students who frequently use marijuana also reported that the stress impacted both their academic and personal lives at higher rates than students who did not use. Thirty-eight percent of frequent users reported that the stress had impacted their academic life considerably or a great deal and 47% reported that the stress impacted their personal life considerably or a great deal. Among non-users, 24% reported that the stress impacted their academic life considerably or a great deal and 33% reported that the stress impacted their personal life considerably or a great deal.

Students who frequently use marijuana reported that their main sources of stress were from school/academics (91%), finances (75%), future plans (61%), and time management (59%). Frequent marijuana users were also more likely to use negative coping strategies to alleviate stress than their peers who do not use, such as using alcohol to relax (47% vs 16%), smoking tobacco to relax (20% vs 2%) and using marijuana to relax (87% vs 0%).

43% of frequent marijuana users reported experiencing stress from mental health concerns, compared to **18%** of students who do not use marijuana.

On and Off-Campus Support

The MACHB asks students to report where they feel they can go both on and off-campus when personal

concerns arise. Students who frequently use marijuana reported feeling that they could go to on and off-campus supports at similar rates as students who do not use marijuana. On-campus, frequent users felt that they could go to friends (75%), the University counseling center (32%) and faculty (18%) at the highest rates. However, 17% of frequent marijuana users felt that they had no one to go to on-campus while 11% of non-users felt that they had no one to go to. This rate was also higher among frequent users than non-users who felt that they did not have anyone off-campus that they could go to for support, 4.4% versus 3%.

Mental Health Concerns

Frequent marijuana users reported higher rates of experiencing a mental health concern in the past year in every category surveyed than their peers who do not use marijuana (see table 1). While this data shows that students who use marijuana are experiencing these concerns, it does not indicate whether students are using marijuana to mitigate these mental health concerns or if some of the concerns are a result of frequent use. While 44% of students who do not use marijuana had not experienced a mental health concern, only 18% of students who frequently use marijuana had not experienced a mental health concern.

Which of the following have you experienced in the past year? [Table 1]		
	Frequent Users	Non Users
Anxiety	71%	47%
Major Depression	48%	22%
Panic Attacks	35%	21%
Chronic Sleep Issues	30%	16%
Eating Disorder	13%	5.8%
Self-Injury	10%	3.9%
Alcohol Abuse	7.3%	1.0%
Bipolar Disorder	6.3%	1.5%
None of the Above	18%	44%

These mental health concerns are self-reported and do not necessarily indicate a diagnosis from a mental health professional

*check all that apply

Frequent marijuana users also sought assistance for their identified mental health concern at lower rates than students who do not use marijuana. While 60% of frequent users sought assistance, 65% of nonusers sought assistance. When frequent marijuana users did seek assistance, they reported going to the university counseling center (12%) and off-campus mental health professionals (11%) at the highest rates.

Students who take the MACHB are asked to report their experiences of suicidal thoughts and attempts in the past year. According to the 2018 data, 39% of frequent marijuana users had suicidal thoughts compared to 16% of students who did not use. While 1.1% of students who do not use marijuana attempted suicide in the past year, 5% of students who frequently use marijuana reported that they had attempted suicide in the past year. However, students who frequently use marijuana reported seeking assistance for their suicidal thoughts or attempts at a higher rate than non-users (38% vs 35%).

Conclusion

MACHB data shows that students who frequently use marijuana experience mental health concerns at higher rates than students who do not use. It is possible that students may be using marijuana to cope with their mental health concerns, and considerations are being made to include questions about reasons for marijuana use on the 2019 survey. While it is encouraging that students who frequently use marijuana feel that they have on and off-campus support and feel empowered to seek assistance for mental health concerns, it is concerning that the rates of mental health concerns, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts are so high.

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