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Marijuana's relationship with mental illness

by Ben Morris

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Stories about the success of medical marijuana have frequently hit the news wire, now an abstract from a Cato Institute study has given medical marijuana activists another reason to fight for the cause.

In the report titled High on Life? Medical Marijuana Laws and Suicide, the authors used medical studies and epidemiological research to show in medical marijuana states, suicide rates drop among the 20-29 male demographic and the 30-39 male demographic.

The five percent drop in suicide rates in states with medical marijuana is attributed in the study by decreased alcohol consumption and the use of marijuana to treat depression; an idea supported by researchers in The Netherlands.

In the summer of 2013, [i]The European Neuropsychopharmacology journal[i] published a study where two separate groups of infrequent marijuana users were split up by researchers with half of the subjects taking a placebo. Research showed, when asked to mimic happy and unhappy facial expressions, the cannabis users were able to accurately match which expressions were happy ones, while being unable to correctly attach unhappy facial expressions. The findings were backed up by MRI scans that showed the THC compound "reduces the negative bias in emotional processing."

The question many could be asking is whether the link between cannabis and the suppression of depressive thoughts is strong. In 2007, a study from McGill University in Montreal used lab rats to test the affect cannabis had on serotonin levels in the brain. Depression is caused by the lack of serotonin in the brain, and researchers at McGill found a small dose of a synthetic cannabinoid had a strong anti-depressant affect. However; an increase of the dosage reversed the result. While other studies have shown marijuana can cause depression, anxiety, and paranoia, the Cato Institute paper shows the promise of marijuana as a treatment for depression.

The most current statistics show one in 10 Americans deal with depression, with 80 percent of sufferers not having a treatment plan to deal with their disease. In contrast to the Cato study, the states with the highest rates of depression are southern states who do not have legal medical marijuana.

The new study may not prove cannabis is a great treatment for depression, but for legal cannabis advocates, the findings present another reason why cannabis should be a legalized medical treatment.