

## The strange thing that happens when marijuana is legalised

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It's been a long time since I've smoked weed. When a casual joint makes an appearance; maybe after a boozy night with friends; my answer is always the same: "No thanks, it triggers my anxiety."

Until recently, my response was met with little more than a passing shrug.

That's no longer the case, said [news.com.au](http://news.com.au).

More than once, I've found myself having to argue my way out of accepting the smoky offering. "You haven't used it in 10 years?!" baulked an acquaintance recently. "Why don't you try again?"

"Why would I? I don't want to risk a panic attack."

"But weed is good for anxiety!" The mixture of conviction and pleading was difficult to say no to, but I persisted.

I've now been informed by so many people that I'm silly to pass up on weed's miraculous benefits, that my conviction is starting to slip.

### WHY THE SUDDEN INFLUX OF WEED ADVOCATES?

Thanks in large part to the legalisation movement in the US, cultural attitudes to cannabis in Australia are beginning to shift. The federal government recently legalised the drug for medicinal use, and now a chorus of voices, from politicians all the way down to your mate Dave, are calling for us to emulate US states like Colorado and fully legalise the drug here.

Cheering loudest for the change is the quickly expanding "weed community", a loosely affiliated cohort of social media stars, Facebook groups and everyday individuals whose passion for the substance knows no bounds.

To these guys, marijuana is a wonder drug, boasting a profile of benefits unmatched by any other substance. And, in the absence of a co-ordinated government campaign, they've become the unofficial spokespeople for the legalisation cause.

What are some of the claims being made by the weed community? Scroll through one of the countless Aussie Facebook pages dedicated to marijuana legalisation and you'll find links to articles from websites claiming the drug "improves cognitive function", has "the same benefits as fish, eggs and nuts", or "literally reverses ageing".

On YouTube, a contingent of popular weed channels share stories on how the drug cured their anxiety, ended their chronic pain, or helped them to quit heroin.

Many in the community believe the plant isn't a drug at all, instead labelling it a "natural herb". And it's this line of reasoning which informs another popular claim: that marijuana is completely non-addictive.

## **WHAT WEED ADDICTION IS LIKE**

"Of course it's addictive!" says Peter\*, 31. Peter started using weed in high school, and by age 16 was smoking more than 10 bonges a day. And he wasn't the only one: "All my friends were hooked as well. That was our main social activity."

Peter explains that until starting weed, he had been heavily into rugby. "I remember getting a letter from my rugby club saying I'd made it into the State squad, but I hid it from my parents because I wanted to smoke bonges instead of training. School was the same: I paid no attention in class. I'd just be waiting for lunchtime when I could chuck in \$2 to buy weed for joints."

When questioned, Peter struggles to explain what he liked about the drug. "Honestly, it made me anxious and paranoid. I'd get heart palpitations, reflux. But I couldn't stop. I was definitely addicted."

Like many teens who use marijuana, Peter eventually moved on to harder drugs, like pills, speed and cocaine. He's clean now. "There just came a point when I knew it was time to stop." But he still has regrets: "I worry about how it affected my growing brain, and the impact it's had on my mental health long term."

So how does Peter's experience, and that of the thousands of other Australians who consider their cannabis use problematic, square with the advocacy of the weed community?

It doesn't prove them wrong. The drug has indeed been shown to have many therapeutic applications. But that's not the only story. The weed community paints a utopian picture of the drug, and while this may be the experience for many Aussies, it's certainly not universal.

The truth is, the black market form of cannabis currently available in Australia is in no way harmless. Over the years, illegal growers have selectively bred the plant to include an increasingly high component of THC, the chemical which gives the drug its marketable 'high'.

Unfortunately, it's also the element of the drug which is associated with the problems Peter discussed.

There's good evidence linking black market cannabis to anxiety, depression, psychosis, mania and schizophrenia. And the people most at risk of developing these conditions are those who begin using the drug as teens.

Cannabis has a reputation as a 'gateway drug' for good reason: it's the most common illegal substance used by adolescents, and in teens who use cannabis regularly, the risk of later becoming addicted to a 'harder' substance, like ice or heroin, is exponentially higher than in those who abstain.

There's also evidence linking cannabis use to detrimental effects on the growing adolescent brain.

If marijuana is associated with so many problems, does that mean it should remain illegal? Not necessarily.

Owen Hughes, 29, has been living in Seattle for a year. Back in Melbourne, he hated smoking weed; "It made my anxiety so much worse"; but since moving to Washington, where the drug is legal for recreational use, his opinion of the substance has flipped.

"When I found out that they have different strains available here, I started researching types that help with my issues and it's worked an absolute treat. No more anxiety! I've even been able to stop using Valium."

As Owen discovered, there's a difference between black market cannabis and the legally available kind.

Jeremy Francis, 29, who has researched the legal American market extensively, explains: "When it's legal, growers are producing a diverse range of strains to cater to various medical needs."

So, someone who has anxiety can purchase a product that's low in THC (which can trigger panic) and high in Cannabidiol (CBD), which is non-psychoactive and may help to reduce anxiety.

CBD is only one of hundreds of compounds that can be selectively enhanced or depressed within the plant, to meet differing therapeutic needs.

"When it's illegal," Jeremy continues, "growers are selecting only for THC, creating a product which has a very high psychoactive component and a very low profile of the compounds which have therapeutic applications."

"It's helping reduce people's dependence on pharmaceuticals," says Owen of legal cannabis. "I never thought I'd find help in weed, but I have."

Legal cannabis must adhere to stringent quality control guidelines. And a 2016 study by the CATO institute in the US found that, contrary to popular fears, legalisation of cannabis in Washington and Colorado has not led to increased rates of use, and has lowered, rather than increased, the crime rate.

Even the *New York Times* recently called for marijuana legalisation across America, arguing that most of the social and economic costs incurred by the drug are the result of the criminalisation of small-time users.

They also emphasise the potential for tax revenue. In Washington alone, over \$400 million in taxes has already been collected from the sale of the drug, and legitimate jobs have replaced the work once done by street dealers.

These arguments form the basis of The Australian Greens' new policy platform, with the party calling last year for decriminalisation of marijuana Australia-wide.

## **SO WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

As pointed out by Vice, perhaps the best approach is to reframe the debate in Australia so it's based on facts, not hyperbolic wonder-claims. At the moment, most people assume that to be pro-legalisation is to be pro-cannabis. This has the effect of alienating anyone who takes issue with the drug from the legalisation cause.

Trying to convince the majority of Australians that marijuana is a harmless wonder drug is going to be an uphill battle. Advocates would do better to point out that, whether you are for or against the use of black market marijuana, there are good arguments to introduce the legal kind.