



# HEALING

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## Get Back to Being You

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### Marijuana: The Real Story

BY DR. MARINO E. CARBONELL

*Heavy marijuana use is associated with cognitive decline in about 5% of teens, according to a new study, which suggests that the heaviest users could lose 8 IQ points.*

As a certified psychotherapist and addiction specialist, my message to young and old is the following: beware marijuana's potency no matter the issue. Whether one discusses the medical merits or legal ramifications, one must also consider the real life implications.

The medical issue: The medical merits of THC, the main ingredient in marijuana, have been identified and THC is available in pill-form as Marinol and Cesamet.

However, according to proponents of legalizing medical marijuana, the medical merits of THC are best experienced by smoking it—absent FDA approval or review. I quote William H. Foster, CASA\* President and CEO, who says that as a society we are "authorizing prescription medicines through the ballot box."

The legal issue: Although several states recently legalized marijuana use, still the legal merits of marijuana cannot be supported. For one, the Controlled Substances Act considers marijuana as a schedule I narcotic (along with heroin.) Second, taxing and collecting revenue does not resolve the economic issue. According to Joseph Califano, Jr., CASA Founder and Chairman, for approximately every \$1 of tax revenue, there could be as much as \$7 incurred in medical costs. Califano also points out that legalizing marijuana means easier availability to children and a factor in contributing to teens' softening

attitude about drugs—specifically marijuana (NIDA.\*\*)

The real issue: Today's marijuana is not the pot of the 1970s. Its THC potency, the amount of psychoactive ingredient found in the drug, has more than doubled since 1983. This decade has brought a 175% jump in pot potency. According to a 2008 analysis from the University of Mississippi's Potency Monitoring Project, the drug's potent effects have severe consequences. Its growing potency not only affects the risk of addiction and increases experimentation to harder drugs such as cocaine and heroin, but also the "risk of psychological, cognitive and respiratory problems."



Another very important statistic reported in the study must be taken very seriously as well—marijuana abuse increases the risk of

developing mental disorders by 40 percent. This is another serious side effect that rarely gets mentioned.

Finally, heavy marijuana use is associated with cognitive decline in about 5% of teens, according to a new study, which suggests that the heaviest users could lose 8 IQ points. The report, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, showed that teens, who started smoking marijuana before age 18 and were diagnosed as being addicted to cannabis by age 38, experienced an IQ drop in early adulthood. ❀

*For additional information please visit [www.marinocarbonell.com](http://www.marinocarbonell.com)*

\* CASA - The National Center on Addiction & Substance Abuse

\*\* NIDA - The National Institute of Drug Abuse

### 10 Ways to Start (and Maintain) a Good New Year

*The best way to have a good year is by living life fully on a daily basis, and by letting the good days accumulate, one by one. And it doesn't have to be New Year's Day to make the resolution to have a good year. Start anytime. Today, for instance.*

- 1. Take time and slow down.** Be mindful of the present moment.
- 2. Care for your body.** Eat well, exercise, treat yourself to loving, nurturing self-care.
- 3. Spend quality time with family and friends.** Communicate, keep in touch. Say "I love you." Tell people you appreciate them.
- 4. Take time to renew yourself.** Take a walk, read a poem or a good book, listen to music. Bring beauty into your life. Retreat from your daily routine.
- 5. Clean up what needs to be cleaned up.** Make amends, fix what's broken, clear away clutter, forgive what needs to be forgiven and let go.
- 6. Commit to a project you really want to do.** Learn something new, or go for what you want. Set achievable goals and work towards them every day.
- 7. Give yourself to a cause.** Volunteer at a nonprofit, a community group, a place of worship, or lend a hand to an individual or family who could use your help.
- 8. Practice your spirituality.** In whatever form you express it, practice daily.
- 9. Laugh every day.**
- 10. Take time to dream.** What will make this a great year? ❀

## A Letter From

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My expertise is in addiction therapy—specifically substance abuse, gambling, and other addictions. With over 20 years of experience, a founder and director of the South Miami Hospital adolescent addiction treatment program and now in private practice, my focus is helping adolescents and families deal with substance and alcohol abuse, parent/teen conflict resolution, stress, and anxiety. I also work with the adult population in dealing with all types of addiction disorders and treatment, family systems, and relationship dynamics.

Blending talk therapy with conventional and alternative approaches, I draw on a variety of styles and techniques to incorporate what will be most helpful for each client. I offer individual, family, and/or group therapy and work with each client to help them build on their strengths to identify and achieve life goals.

I am a Licensed Psychotherapist, National Certified Counselor (NCC) and Board Certified in Professional Counseling with a doctorate in Child and Youth Studies from Nova Southeastern University's Fischler Graduate School of Education and Human Services and a master's in Mental Health Counseling; a specialist in the field of addictions, I am certified in Addictions Counseling from the University of Miami and am a Certified Addictions Professional (CAP) since 1994. I am a Lifetime Member and Fellow of the American Psychotherapy Association and a member of the American Counseling Association.

## Are You Too Cautious?

Helen Keller, blind and deaf educator, said: "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." Sometimes it's wise to be cautious, particularly when physical safety is at stake. However, when we play it safe simply to protect our ego or heart, we may close off possibilities that could bring us greater joy and fulfillment. Life is what we make of it, shaped by our choices. What are you choosing? Answer "true" or "false" to the following statements to discover if you are too cautious.



### True False

#### Set 1

- 1. Life doesn't feel safe. I'm content with things as they are and prefer to stay in my "comfort zone."
- 2. I'm afraid something bad will happen if I veer off my usual course. I feel safer and more confident when I stick to what I already know.
- 3. I frequently worry "what if...?" If I can't be certain of the outcome, I won't take the risk. Being rejected, looking stupid and failing are not options.
- 4. I know there are business and romantic opportunities I've missed out on because of being so risk-averse.
- 5. My fear of the unknown is paralyzing. When I look at my life, I have many regrets about things I didn't do.
- 6. I feel bad about myself for being so cautious. I think of myself as a coward and I expect that others see me that way, too.

#### Set 2

- 1. I am committed to growing myself bigger than my fears. It's not that I'm unafraid; it's just that I am more committed to my goals and know the cost of playing it safe.
- 2. Developing courage is like building a muscle. The more I practice taking risks, even small ones, the more empowered I feel.
- 3. When I have a goal or dream that feels big and scary, I minimize feeling overwhelmed by "chunking it down" into more manageable, short-term steps.
- 4. I enlist the support of those who can help me move beyond my comfort zone to a more fulfilling life.
- 5. When I take risks, I trust I can handle whatever comes. If I fall, I know that I can get up again. I don't conclude that I shouldn't have tried or that I'm a failure.
- 6. My biggest successes have come when I've taken a big leap of faith.

If you answered True more often in Set 1 and False more often in Set 2, you may wish to learn some effective ways to move beyond your comfort zone to live a more fulfilled life. Please call me if you'd like support in exploring this further. 🌸

## Teenagers: Why Do They Act Like That?

If you're raising a teenager, no doubt your mantra is "What were you thinking?" Teens aren't known for making the best decisions. Or planning ahead. Or considering consequences. The list of patience-trying teen behaviors goes on and on. . . .

Here's the good news. They'll get over it.

Here's the startling news. When they say, "But, Mom, it isn't my fault!" they may be partially right.

### It's their brains.

In terms of human development, the brain undergoes two periods of enormous growth: from birth to about age four, and then again from about ages 10 to 14.

Dr. Jay Giedd, of the National Institute of Mental Health, says of the adolescent and teen years, "In many ways, it's the most tumultuous time of brain development since coming out of the womb."

Whereas an infant's and toddler's brain is literally growing, a teenager's brain is remodeling itself, mostly by making and pruning connections. Instead of having a screw loose, as the old saying goes about someone who makes poor decisions, teens—metaphorically speaking—have wires loose.

Up to this point, adolescents and teens have mostly been acting from their emotions (think limbic system) and pleasure-and-reward systems (think amygdala), which explains a lot about their behavior.

Now, as they approach and go through puberty, they are preparing to become adults, and their brains know it. It's time for the brain to rewire itself, adding millions of new connections between those emotional-impulsive behavioral centers and the frontal lobes, especially the prefrontal cortex.

This is the "executive" center of the brain, the area that is active when we rationally assess situations, consider the consequences of our and others' actions, and set priorities—generally all those things we expect our teens to know how to do but that their brains are not yet fully wired to do.

The prefrontal cortex is the last area of the brain to be developed, and the rewiring will go on well into their 20s.

At the same time that all these new connections are forming, your teen's brain is strengthening already existing connections and pruning less used ones. Whatever your teen is focusing on—sports, study, friendships or, conversely, zoning out in front of the TV or endlessly playing video games—gets reinforced by the brain. Those connective pathways that are not continually activated get pared away.

What's crucial about this rewiring is that it influences the skills that teens take with them into adulthood. To some extent the old adage "use it or lose it" holds true.

To be fair, this spurt of brain remodeling is not an excuse for a teen's sometimes exasperating behavior. But it does provide parents insight into why teens think something is a great idea when you don't, why they can't seem to plan or organize when you think doing so is a no-brainer, why they act without considering consequences that you think are incredibly obvious.

Simply put, at this point in their development, teen brains have problems separating what's important from what's not so important.



### So how can you use this knowledge to your advantage?

Experts suggest strategies that include being clear in your instructions and guiding your teen with advice, but doing so with a soft touch. Your teen needs to "practice" being an adult without being punished for not yet being one.

Cultivate the patience to allow them to make mistakes with their growing independence. They are learning to curb their impulses and mediate their emotions. They are learning reasoning, logic and analysis.

Whether they show it or not, they will look to the adults in their lives—meaning you—as examples.

This is a trying time for many parents, for while teens might seem to be pushing you away as they "practice" being independent, they also will be secretly watching and learning from you since you are the most important adult in their life. ❀

## Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude

Every evening before digging in to dinner, members of the Shilonoff family take turns listing something they received that day, a self-acknowledgment for something that might have been difficult or a stretch, and something for which they are grateful.

A typical response from the children (ages 10, 9 and 6): "I got a compliment from one of my classmates." "I finished my piano practice before school." And "I'm glad we have a dog and cat."

Though full of the everydayness of life, their responses show that the children—and the whole family—are developing a profound practice of gratitude.

The words *thanks*, *gratitude* and *giving* derive from the word *grace* and refer to meaningful, authentic ways to acknowledge the grace in our lives. Too often, however, we are trained to notice what is broken, undone or lacking in our lives.

Gratitude is a perception, a way of looking at things, and an attitude of gratitude is a cornerstone of long-term mental and physical health. It balances us and gives us hope.



Numerous long-term studies suggest that a positive, appreciative attitude contributes to greater success in work, greater health, peak performance in sports and business, a higher sense of well-being and a faster rate of recovery from surgery.

But for gratitude to meet its full healing potential in our lives and the lives of our children, it needs to become more than just a Thanksgiving word. When we practice giving thanks verbally for all we have instead of complaining about what we lack, we give our children—and ourselves—the chance to see all of life as an opportunity and a blessing.

There are many things to be grateful for: autumn leaves, legs that work, friends who listen and really hear, chocolate, cars that work (usually), warm jackets, jump ropes, garage sales, the ability to read, swings, rain boots, being alive, butterflies. The list is truly endless. To cultivate gratitude, we begin by noticing the concrete ways in which the world supports us each day.

This may mean overcoming the three main obstacles to gratitude:

self-preoccupation, expectation, and entitlement. Self-preoccupation leads us to focus our attention on our problems, difficulties, aches and pains. Similarly, it's only when our expectation isn't met that we notice, such as when a light bulb goes out. And when we think we're entitled to something, we won't consider it a gift.

Some ideas for helping the whole family learn the attitude of gratitude:

- Keep a family gratitude journal or "Gratitude Attitude Calendar." Younger members can write one-word answers.
- Make a gratitude collage by drawing or pasting pictures.
- Practice gratitude around the dinner table or make it part of the bedtime routine.
- Make it a game to find the hidden blessing in a situation.
- Let each child have his or her own day on which the rest of the family tells why they are grateful for his/her life.
- Assign a gratitude list to counteract a litany of complaints.

Bit by bit, an inner shift begins to occur, and we may be delighted to discover how content and hopeful we are feeling. This sense of fulfillment is gratitude at work. 🌸

Marino E. Carbonell is a licensed psychotherapist specializing in the field of addiction treatment for the adolescent and adult population. He maintains a private practice in Miami, Florida.

Dr. Carbonell has vast community involvement and has served as consultant to several private schools in South Florida. He travels locally to public and private schools lecturing about the symptoms and consequences of substance and alcohol abuse to students and parents. He is a member of the advisory board of directors of Informed Families and recently received the Special Speakers Recognition Award. Additionally, he has written extensively about the subject of addiction and cognitive moral development in young adults.

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