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Across cultures, each has an ideology that shapes their understanding of marijuana use. In some cultures, consumption of marijuana in any form is deemed harmful to the body and mind. Those of this belief system often view marijuana as a mind-altering drug, thus supporting it being illegal. For others, marijuana is viewed as a form of alternative medicine. They use marijuana to treat anything ailing both the body and mind. These consumers of marijuana are often supportive of it being legalized. Though I do not consume marijuana on a regular basis, I do believe marijuana should be legalized.

A productive place to start would be identifying what marijuana *is*. Marijuana, according to the Meriam Webster Dictionary is “the psychoactive dried resinous flower buds and leaves of the female hemp or cannabis plant (*Cannabis sativa* or *C. indica*) that contain high levels of THC and are smoked, vaped, or ingested (as in baked goods) especially for their intoxicating effect. Marijuana goes by many names; weed, bud, gas, loud and ZaZa (to name a few.) Marijuana production began in America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Virginia Assembly even made it a legal requirement for farmers to grow the hemp plant on their farms. Hemp was a required plant in America due to its pharmaceutical purposes. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marijuana was deemed a cardinal ingredient in many medicines, and was also sold in stores.

One may ask “how did marijuana go from being a cardinal ingredient in medicine to something that led to people serving prison sentences?” The answer to that—racially motivated

classism. Although Marijuana was a requirement according to government laws, its recreational “feel good” usage was not fully recognized until large groups of Mexican immigrants came to America following the Mexican Revolution in 1910. In Mexico, marijuana was already a cultural delight being enjoyed by many for recreation. However, instead of embracing this new understanding of Marijuana, America associated it with their disdain of Mexican people and ultimately demonized it. America even went as far as associating crimes committed by Mexican people with their recreational use of marijuana. This led to marijuana going from being deemed medicinal to criminal (despite the marijuana itself remaining the same.) Ultimately, marijuana lost its value due to its association with the “low class.” Marijuana being enjoyed by the Mexican immigrants linked it to deviant behavior and increased crime rates by association.

It was not until 1944 when research was conducted dispelling the “scientific” research linking marijuana usage to deviant behaviors. The New York Academy of medicine conducted their own in-depth research study which discovered that not only was marijuana not causing criminal behaviors, but it was also not a gateway for other drugs. In the 60’s, there was a change in the attitude towards marijuana. In the 60’s, marijuana use was normalized and somewhat glamorized as well. However, in the 70’s, there were heavy fines and jail sentences for the possession of marijuana. Throughout the 80’s and 90’s , many acts surrounding marijuana usage were started. Of these acts were the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1984 whose mission was to increase the penalty for possession of marijuana. This act deemed marijuana possession just as dangerous as heroin possession. Now, in present times, marijuana is something that can be prescribed by doctors and legally purchased at dispensaries with a medical marijuana card.

As you can see, the American government has had an unsteady view of marijuana from the beginning. In one generation it was deemed necessary, in the next it was demonized—and so

on. How, then, can we rely on the American government to enforce laws on marijuana when it, itself, has waived on its understanding of marijuana? Especially when historically, it was not deemed dangerous until it was associated with immigration. If one finds marijuana to be beneficial for them, they should not be treated like a criminal.

The cannabinoids in marijuana contain medicinal properties. According to a Harvard Health article called “Medical Marijuana” written by Peter Grinspoon, though marijuana does possess intoxicating effects, marijuana can be used to control pain levels. One does not have to get high, though, to receive the medicinal benefits of marijuana. This is due to the fact that the marijuana plant is composed of many elements. The THC in marijuana is the element responsible for its psychoactive effects. However, the cannabinoids in the plant help with pain relief. CBD is derived from marijuana and sold in many places legally. CBD does not even have to be ingested. It can be found in creams, oils and bodywashes. Grinspoon links CBD use with its ability to relieve insomnia, epilepsy, anxiety and the severe pain that comes from some life threatening illnesses. Grinspoon notes that though marijuana may not be strong enough to relieve the pain that one may feel from—let’s say—a knee surgery, however, it does have positive impacts on chronic pain that many Americans possess. Those suffering from nerve pain, decreased appetite or chronic nausea (to name a few) benefit greatly from marijuana. Marijuana is a healthier alternative to over-the-counter pain relievers, and it is definitely safer than opiates such as oxycodone and Vicodin.

Aside from its medicinal properties, marijuana is a pleasure for many people in America. For some people, coming home and smoking marijuana after working 8+ hours helps them to decompress and realign their thoughts. Among these people, marijuana is not a debilitating drug. It’s a form of relief that HELPS them transition from work to homelife, successfully. They are

working, contributing members to society who simply enjoy the feeling of marijuana in their system. No more, no less. Because marijuana helps those with low appetites, it can help them develop the taste for denser meals. This can help make sure nutritional needs are being met. Marijuana is also a social equalizer. It has the power to bring people from all walks of life together. For example, you may find a 20 something suburban white male enjoying marijuana with a 35-year-old Spanish man from Argentina. While partaking, they can pass the marijuana back and forth while getting to know each other. Again, these two could have been brought together because of nothing other than their shared interest in marijuana. Many people may also feel a heightened sense of creativity after they consume marijuana.

America celebrates the day that young adults are able to legally consume alcohol. This is despite alcohol being a depressant that kills hundreds of thousands of Americans yearly. Being under the influence of alcohol lowers one's inhibitions and leads to poor, uncharacteristic decision making. It also severely impairs one's motor skills which can lead to fatal accidents or gruesome falls. Many couples have unfortunately experienced divorce due to how alcoholism has negatively impacted their marriage. The list could go on, but my main point is that this dangerous substance is not only legal, but culturally celebrated in America, despite the harm it does to the body. How can we legalize and rejoice this poison, but demonize marijuana, a substance derived from nature itself.

Although marijuana's origin in this country does trace back to prejudice, there are various other reasons as to why it is viewed as dangerous. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), marijuana has both long- and short-term effects on the brain. Some of the short-term effects are; hallucinations, impaired ability to think critically and problem solve and delusions. These effects are generally experienced when marijuana is consumed in high doses.

Long term, if marijuana is consumed during the teenage years, it may impact brain development. Long term, memory and learning ability are altered. The NIDA notes that a study done in New Zealand revealed that those who started smoking in their teen years had an IQ score that was 8 points lower than those who didn't. Another study revealed that those who smoke marijuana had fewer verbal abilities and knowledge (overall) than those who do not smoke. The NIDA also notes that marijuana has higher amounts of THC than it ever did before. As a result, someone who may smoke THC for the first time and has a lower tolerance to begin with may ingest an amount that is too high for them. This increases their risk for psychosis and delusions. Some of the (negative) physical effects of THC consumption are breathing issues, increased heart rate and if done while pregnant—impaired child development. Those who have mental illnesses are potentially at risk when consuming THC. For example, if someone lives with schizophrenia, consumption of marijuana in any form could offset their symptoms. Vaping has become incredibly popular through the years and is another way marijuana can be consumed. However, vaping can be deadly. Though marijuana itself has never been a reported cause of death, the way in which it is consumed (vaping) can be deadly.

Though consuming THC has its affects (depending on the person), as stated before, one can enjoy the benefits of marijuana while completely bypassing the THC. One can also do this without smoking as well. This is due to the fact that marijuana is a multifaceted plant comprised of different elements, all with varying purposes. Smoking is not a healthy lifestyle choice and will cause wear and tear on the lungs. Should one decide that they do want to partake, they can find a healthier way that is best suited for them and reflects optimal wellness. It is also great that the benefits and risks of marijuana consumption are made public knowledge. This gives people the ability to enjoy responsibly!