

# Tough Topics: Discussing Marijuana Use

This toolkit offers some education and facts surrounding the drug marijuana and its various forms. We will also provide a framework for how to talk about these hard topics within our counseling and ministry work. Because of the complexity of the issue, we have provided additional resources at the end of the toolkit.

## The Facts

**How does Marijuana work?** When you smoke, eat, “dab” or “vape” marijuana, chemicals called “cannabinoids” are released into your body. Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the main cannabinoid, which binds with certain receptors in the brain that causes a “high.”

**What is Recreational Marijuana?** Recreational use means that someone chooses to use marijuana recreationally, as opposed to medical marijuana, which is prescribed by a doctor to treat a specific condition. While recreational marijuana is now legal in 19 states, it is currently illegal on a federal level. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) still classifies cannabis as a Schedule I drug, a drug with no current accepted medical use. Other Schedule I drugs include heroin and LSD. The NYS law passed in March 2021 states: *“Adults aged 21+ are allowed to possess up to 3 ounces (85 g) of cannabis or 0.85 ounces (24 g) of concentrated cannabis. Adults 21 and older are allowed to possess up to 5 lbs individually in their own homes.”* And you are not allowed to drive under the influence of Marijuana.

Note that there’s no mention of the THC levels in the law, which is a crucial point.

**High potency (THC) Marijuana:** In conversations about marijuana, we need to realize legal does not equal safe and harmless. High potency THC Marijuana is not the same drug that we were seeing in the 60s or even the 80s—the levels of THC have skyrocketed. In the early 1990s, the THC level of an average joint was less than 4%. In 2018, the average THC in confiscated marijuana samples was 15%. Marijuana concentrates such as Dabs or vape juice can have anywhere from 60-90% THC! Research shows that a person can get the maximum high at around 33% THC. Beyond that, you are not able to get “more high, you are just getting more stupid,” (Bornstein, 2022) meaning the THC is causing negative damage to your brain and body, such as anxiety and psychosis. Moreover, research consistently shows negative impacts of THC on the developing adolescent brain.

Understanding the THC level in Marijuana is crucial to understanding the impact of marijuana use on a person. More resources about the effects of marijuana are provided at the end of the tool.

## How to have the hard conversation

Now with some background, let's turn to having a conversation with someone who is using or thinking about using marijuana. You can use these suggestions to help you overcome anxiety and obstacles to having the conversation.

1. **Start by identifying your own beliefs and biases.** What do you think about marijuana use or drug use of any kind? The stigma associated with addiction and drug abuse is a real problem and can keep us from even starting a conversation or approaching it without bias or prejudice. One way to identify your beliefs and fears is to write them down, clarifying your feelings and ideas on the topic.
2. **Approach the topic without judgment.** We may not struggle with drug use, but we all desire comfort and pleasure and seek various things to fill those needs. Therefore, try not to judge. Instead have compassion when talking to someone about their use or desire to try marijuana. Start the conversation with curiosity and questions, seeking first to understand. Be willing to listen even if you don't agree. If they are just thinking about using, ask why they want to try and what they think it will do. If they're regular users, ask them how they view their use and what their experience is related to their use. Use reflective listening to help them know that you heard them.
3. **Steer the conversation away from legal vs illegal.** If the conversation just stays on legal versus illegal, you may quickly find yourself in an unhelpful impasse. 1 Corinthians 10:23 states, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful." (ESV) This verse can help frame the conversation with grace, allowing the discussion to be less about right and wrong and more about growing in wisdom. A few simple questions related to this verse are: *How do you think marijuana will help you? How do you think it could hurt you? Has it hurt you and how?*
4. **Engage their curiosity and encourage thoughtfulness.** Assume that if someone is using marijuana that they have done their homework and ask questions that reflect this assumption. The spirit of the conversation is not to make the person look stupid or you smarter but to sincerely explore how the person has resolved these issues in their mind. They may not know, or they may know it all and do not care, but at the very least, they may walk away from the conversation having learned something or being challenged.

Ask questions such as: *How do you check for the level of THC you are getting? Do you have concerns about the high potency THC and all the negative mental issues it has triggered? How do you feel about the lack of regulation in the industry about potency? Have you experienced withdrawal? What THC level are you comfortable*

*with using? How do you ingest marijuana? Have you heard of Miner's Lung for those who vape?*

Research still needs to catch up with legalized recreational marijuana, like it did with tobacco use. In the 1940s, even doctors would go into a patient's room with a cigarette but now we have better data on the widespread negative effects of smoking. Early research indicates an increase in negative impact on many areas of life and that marijuana use does change the brain. Anecdotal reports also indicate increased emergency room visits for mental illness, DWIs and crashes in states where recreational marijuana is legalized. And new legislation was just introduced in Colorado to mandate a warning that marijuana can cause psychosis, similar to warnings that cigarettes can cause lung cancer.

5. **Help consider the risks of addiction.** Some research indicates that marijuana is a gateway drug, meaning it leads to harder drug use. Similar to alcohol, people may argue that they can drink and not become addicted because they will know how far is too far. But research shows no one can guarantee that. Experts cannot tell why one person becomes addicted to alcohol, marijuana or any other drug as opposed to someone else. There are risk factors, but there are no clear indicators that predict, and users may not have as much control as they believe. We should be reminded that no one uses alcohol, tobacco or marijuana with the intention of becoming addicted. Explore risk factors with them, such as a family history of substance abuse, a current mental illness such as anxiety or depression, or a history of trauma.
6. **Pause to reflect on the deeper need they are trying to fill.** Often, the person may view the substance as the only source that can meet some personal need. "Nothing is as good as the glass of wine at the end of the day, or the high after a stressful week, or smoking to calm my nerves." Their desire to use marijuana may very likely be a chemical bypass, where they are looking to cover up or numb some discomfort they do not want to address. A person may be using marijuana to self-medicate an issue such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, fear, etc.

Our desire for comfort is ok until it evolves into a demand; "a good thing becomes an ultimate thing," as Tim Keller says. When the desire for comfort becomes inordinate, turning to a chemical to help us feel better can start us down a destructive path where the substance bypasses our need for God, who is the only one who can ultimately meet our needs. Help the person use the conversation as an opportunity to check-in with themselves, become more self-aware and turn to God with their desire for comfort or relief. Help them think through: *When do you tend to want to use? What happened that day when you really wanted to get high? Is there something going on that you want to feel better about? As they answer honestly,*

help them see how they could turn to God with these things in an honest conversation. *In what ways could God meet you in that need?*

7. **Keep the conversation going and take the pressure off yourself.** The goal of these conversations is to communicate care and to create an open dialogue and safe place where people become more thoughtful about marijuana. Release yourself from the responsibility of the outcome. If they walk away feeling cared for and thinking deeply about the questions you raised, with a better understanding of how marijuana could affect them or even a new way of looking at the issue, consider the conversation a success! The first few times you have this conversation, you may feel nervous, ill-equipped or unsure. As you engage more, you will get better with practice. There is peace in knowing God is with you as an encourager, and not a harsh critic, to help you overcome fear and doubt in these tough conversations.

**Other Resources:**

1. [Drug Facts: Marijuana](#)
2. [Risks of Marijuana](#)
3. [New York's Marijuana Law](#)