



Three Paths: An Effective Way to Answer the “Is Marijuana a Gateway Drug” Question

“Is marijuana a gateway drug?” – Any substance abuse counselor at this point is probably sick of hearing that redundant and often misleading question. The following explanation is time-tested, reasonable and easy to understand for just about everyone. See for yourself:

First, just in case there is anyone out there who doesn’t understand the question: “Is marijuana a gateway drug?” – Here is clarification of what that question means, starting with the definition:

Gateway - *allowing entry, access, or progress to a more extreme form: gateway drug,*

Therefore, viewing marijuana as a “gateway drug” would indicate that a person who starts using marijuana first will eventually end up using “harder” (more severe and dangerous) drugs at some point (such as cocaine, benzos, heroin, etc.)

The “Three Paths” Explanation to the Gateway Drug Discussion

First of all, one major mistake that many people make when discussing whether or not marijuana is a gateway drug is by looking at the discussion as if it is a “black or white” (Yes or No) issue. To look at only the two foremost extremes of the issue, by saying that marijuana either definitively **is or is not** a gateway drug, ignores a lot of the “middle ground”. The “Three Paths” answer to the marijuana gateway question is not as limited or polarizing as simply saying it is or is not a gateway, and it is a much more comprehensive and conceivable way to view this issue, than simply answering the question “yes” or “no”.

The Three Paths Explained: The fact is that there is usually one of three eventual outcomes when someone starts using marijuana regularly at an early age. (Hence there are **three paths** one will go down when starting to use marijuana in one’s youth)

Path 1 – “The Phase” - Some individuals use marijuana for a time period starting some time in their youth, perhaps then using for many years afterward but then they **eventually just stop on their own**. Marijuana use in this case was just a *phase* that started and one day and then ended after the passage of time. This is often due to some form advancement in maturity or increased levels of responsibility or an individual may just simply grow tired of smoking weed and therefore stop. For example, there are many people who smoked weed in high school, college and perhaps into their 20’s or even 30’s who end up just giving it up on their own one day with little or no struggle. Circumstances such as having children, or career advancement can play a role and at other times some people simply “grow out of it” when it comes to their desire to smoke marijuana later in life. Many people reading this article right now can identify with this category or path which in itself contradicts the gateway concept.

Path 2 – “The Lifetime User” – Within this path there are a wide variety of potential variables. The person who ends up on this path uses marijuana on some level for the rest of their lives deep into adulthood and at times beyond. Some of the individuals in this category smoke marijuana to a level that inhibits their full potential to some degree and there may even be some regrettable consequences. However, others in this category may use marijuana and still end up leading what would be considered to be a productive and in some cases even successful lives with no visible or noticeable consequences associated with their marijuana use. The common thread amongst people on this path is that the **marijuana use is continued, but it never really leads to any sustained use of harder drugs**. In other words, the person on this path never becomes addicted to a more dangerous drug such as heroin in spite of ongoing long term marijuana use. This path too, defies the marijuana-gateway concept. Nowadays, many people may know someone whose life course followed this path.

Path 3 – “The Gateway” – Although the first two paths spurn the gateway theory, this path legitimizes and validates the idea of marijuana as an actual gateway substance. There are those individuals who start at first using marijuana who one day develop some form of lasting dependency and prolonged tolerance. In this case,



marijuana eventually may no longer suit its “purpose” thus prompting a person on this path to try other drugs to get the desired level of “high” as marijuana alone over time may no longer do the trick. The individuals on this gateway path therefore often end up addicted to harder drugs such as heroin. Some kids start using marijuana in high school at age 15 or 16 then may use for years, perhaps even for a decade into their 20’s but eventually find themselves sticking a needle in their arm or using some other drugs at some later point in life. The many, many heroin and other “hard” drug users out there who first started with marijuana but then progressed on more severe drugs validate the impossible to ignore reality that this third gateway path does exist for some unfortunate individuals. Many individuals with more serious addictive issues will testify to this process occurring in their own lives. (E.g. The heroin dependent individual who testifies to the fact that “it all started with weed”)

So what does all of this mean? Is marijuana a gateway drug or not? Clearly, based on the three paths explanation, the correct and rational answer to the marijuana gateway question is that **marijuana can be a gateway to other drugs**. It’s not that it is or isn’t a gateway drug but that there is the **possibility** for some people who use marijuana to progress to harder drugs. The gateway phenomenon happens to some people however it does not happen to many others. Some people who use marijuana progress to a more serious level and some do not. Most people would agree that this is a rational and logical explanation to this “debate”. However, this discussion does not end here. There is one more key factor to consider in the three paths explanation: The role of **choice**.

Finally, Examining the Role of “Choice” in this Gateway Discussion

A young person who is smoking marijuana who hears the three paths explanation to the gateway idea will likely say something like, “I’ll smoke weed now but when I get older I’ll just stop on my own, no problem” (Choice: Path 1) Or they may say something like “This sounds good to me, I’ll just be one of those successful marijuana users and continue to smoke weed without any consequences and live happily ever after” (Choice: Path 2) It only makes sense that a young person smoking marijuana would reason this way because few people ever ahead of time envision an eventual life of suffering with serious and chronically progressive drug addiction. For example, what young marijuana user has ever said anything such as: ““I am just smoking weed right now but one day I eventually see myself moving on to a painful life of heroin addiction!” (Choice? Path 3). **No chooses to live a life of hard core drug addiction. No one starts using marijuana with the plan that it is going to be a springboard into something worse.** In fact it is very common for a young adult who is dependent on heroin to look back on their youth of marijuana use and say **“I never saw this coming”**.

The truth is that there are many factors that can contribute to an increased likelihood of addiction including genetic predisposition, various psychological and emotional factors, age of onset, trauma history and many other factors which can be beyond an individual’s full control. These factors in combination often play a much larger role with regard to which one of the three paths one follows, as opposed to just choice alone dictating the answer. If the path an individual followed was only dependent upon choosing wisely then very few people would become addicted to drugs like heroin and crack, starting from marijuana, because few if any people would ever deliberately choose that painful path. So the conclusion to the marijuana gateway discussion in short is that **there are three paths one can take when using marijuana, however not everyone gets to choose the outcome**.

Key Points:

- Thankfully, most people who smoke marijuana never move on to becoming addicted to harder drugs.
- However, some marijuana smokers, *in spite of their best intentions*, will in fact become addicted to more severe drugs at some point sooner or later.
- There are many factors that can play a role with regard to the marijuana gateway drug phenomenon including genetics, trauma, family, social and emotional factors, therefore choice alone does not determine the outcome. (A young person simply saying “I will never move on to harder drugs” by itself not enough to prevent that from occurring)

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