

These mothers of suicides don't think marijuana is harmless

By Mikaela Conley
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Sally Schindel couldn't remember the last time she'd stood in the rain so long. It was odd — the heavy rain — in the middle of the Arizona desert.

Police had prohibited Schindel from going into the house where her son, Andy, lived, so she waited for hours in the driveway, alongside officers and a court-ordered psychiatrist, pleading with them to allow her to go inside and ensure that her 31-year-old son was OK.

Earlier that day in March of 2014, Andy had texted a friend disturbing messages, warning that he was a danger to himself and to others. He'd struggled with depression and bouts of psychosis for years, but when the friend notified Schindel about the messages, police deemed the texts threatening and prevented her from going inside the home.

The five years leading up to that day in the driveway had been a nightmarish downward spiral, “something no parent should go through,” she said. Schindel described how Andy began smoking marijuana regularly and soon experienced major depression, psychosis, “countless” threats of suicide, five psychiatric hospitalizations, and two court orders for mental health treatment.

“In a way it was a shock, and in a way, it wasn't at all,” Schindel said of her ex-husband's finding their son dead in the backyard from suicide that night. When her ex told her the news, she noticed the mud caked on his jeans — a remnant of a fruitless attempt to revive their son on the soggy ground.

As lobbyists and some state governments work to legalize marijuana for medical and recreational use throughout the U.S., Schindel has become an outspoken critic of the potential legislation, convinced that high-potency marijuana led her son down a chaotic road of severe mental health issues and ultimately suicide.

More people in the U.S. smoke marijuana than ever before. An exclusive Yahoo News/Marist Poll of Americans finds the majority believe marijuana use is socially acceptable. But they are divided on the issue of whether to legalize marijuana for recreational use. Forty-nine percent say they support its use for recreational purposes, and 47 percent oppose it. Thirty percent say their biggest concern with using marijuana is that it is illegal. Eighteen percent worry that it affects people's judgment and decisions, 14 percent report they are concerned it will lead to other drug use, and 13 percent say it has negative long-term health effects.

Still in the throes of her grief, Schindel connected with Lori Robinson, another mother who believes cannabis addiction is responsible for her son's suicide. Robinson said her son Shane was vibrant and accomplished before he began regularly smoking marijuana in his early 20s. He quickly experienced severe psychiatric issues, even though he had no known history of mental illness. Robinson said he had two episodes of THC-induced psychosis and was hospitalized in a locked psych unit each of those times.

“We all felt like we were reliving scenes from ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,’” said Robinson. On Jan. 13, 2012, Shane, at the age of 25, committed suicide in his family cabin near Yosemite National Park.

While Robinson is quick to point out that not all young people will develop severe mental health issues from smoking pot, she “guarantees” that there are young people “everywhere” who are struggling with marijuana addiction. In the Yahoo News/Marist Poll, a majority of parents, 54 percent, agree that marijuana is addictive (31 percent) and/or is addictive and leads to other drug use (23 percent).

Together, Schindel and Robinson created Moms Strong, a support group that seeks to “unmask the marijuana charade.” The women often give talks at schools, juvenile detention centers, and community groups to aid in the organization’s mission to “inform and educate people about those harmed by marijuana.” The moms’ group joins the ranks of several other anti-marijuana forces, including Citizens Against Legalization of Marijuana (CALM), Save Our Society From Drugs (S.O.S.), and Parents Opposed to Pot.

While recreational marijuana remains illegal on the federal level, eight states — Alaska, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oregon and Washington, along with D.C. — have voted to legalize it for recreational as well as medicinal use. Advocates argue that legalization would increase tax revenue and jobs and bolster tourism.

Marijuana or marijuana-derived products have been used for decades as part of a treatment regimen for a number of illnesses, including AIDS, epilepsy, neuropathic pain, multiple sclerosis, and cancer. Beyond its benefits in treating disease symptoms, research also shows that cannabis may slow the progression of Alzheimer’s disease, and some studies have shown that it is linked to a reduction in anxiety and depression.

Still, conflicting research depicts a darker side of marijuana use and its potential effects. Several large studies have shown a correlation between marijuana use and schizophrenia and psychosis, but most scientists acknowledge they can’t say whether a person with schizophrenia is more likely to self-medicate with pot or a regular smoker is more likely to develop schizophrenia.

Other studies have analyzed marijuana use and increased risk of suicide. Among several that found a connection, 2014 research published in the *Lancet Psychiatry* journal found that teenagers who smoked marijuana on a daily basis were seven times more likely to commit suicide and were at eight times greater risk of using other illegal drugs in their 20s. The same study found that teens who smoked daily were 60 percent less likely to graduate from high school.

Research shows that about 9 percent of people who use marijuana will become dependent on it. That number rises to about 17 percent for those who start smoking pot in their teen years, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Experts say marijuana addiction is rare, but real. “I have patients who have lost jobs, or failed to get meaningful employment, as a result,” said Josh Smith, MD, a chronic pain physician in North Carolina. “I have discharged patients from my clinic for continuing to use marijuana despite my counseling. This fits the general description of addiction — where patients continue to use a substance despite the consequences of doing so.”

Aubree Adams of Pueblo, Colo., said her son began using marijuana at 14 before he became addicted and moved on to harder drugs, including meth and ultimately heroin, by the time he was 15.

“He was paranoid, delusional, irrational, and violent,” she said, adding that he attempted suicide and was hospitalized in the psychiatric unit before coming home, only to have the cycle repeat.

Adams said she expressed concern to doctors over his marijuana use, but they brushed her off. “It’s only marijuana,” they said. Finally, after a “hellish” few years, Adams finally found a rehabilitation facility out of state, where her son is making “a remarkable recovery.”

“I know I’m one of the lucky ones.”

She added that the marijuana of today is much different than that of yesteryear: “We have this high-potency ‘crack weed’ everywhere now. I have been completely robbed of my son’s teenage years because of this drug.”

Marijuana potency has indeed skyrocketed in recent decades, said Randi Schuster, a marijuana researcher at Harvard University. “The weed people were smoking in the ’60s and ’70s is not the same product that kids are using today.”

Marijuana is still illegal on the federal level, so states — not the FDA — regulate marijuana being sold legally. According to Rob Goulding of the Colorado Department of Revenue’s Marijuana Enforcement Division, there is no maximum allowable potency of marijuana sold in Colorado, though the department does require labeling of the potency on containers and packages.

Because the adolescent brain is under development and the brain regions undergoing the most changes are dense with THC receptors, “it is imperative that we do not underestimate the impact of today’s drug on cognitive, academic, and psychological functioning,” continued Schuster.

Still, marijuana advocates argue that potency is no different than the strength of various types of alcohol. Many express frustration with those fighting against cannabis legalization.

“Just like there’s a difference in potency of whiskey and beer, and a difference in consumer behavior that goes along with it, there’s a difference between marijuana products,” said Aaron

Smith, executive director of the National Cannabis Industry Association. “That doesn’t make one inherently more dangerous than another.”

While Schuster is in favor of the decriminalization of marijuana, she said there is not enough scientific data to convince her that legalization for recreational use makes sense right now.

Josh Smith agreed: “My primary concern is the unknown.”

Commercialization is likely to come with targeted advertising for and sale of not only marijuana but also high-potency oils, candies and other kid-friendly items, Schuster explained.

“This is alarming because mounting scientific evidence suggests that youth may be particularly susceptible to adverse consequences from regular marijuana use,” said Schuster.

“By making policy decisions before conducting the appropriate science, I worry we are putting the cart before the horse and may be on the road to repeating the same mistakes made with Big Tobacco decades ago,” she continued.

It’s important to note that marijuana is a very complicated plant with many compounds, experts say. While some of these compounds, such as cannabidiol, may have a therapeutic benefit for certain conditions, convincing data are not available yet, and, with any new pharmacological treatment, cannabis advertisers should be cautious about making big claims until the science has been conducted and scrutinized.

Schindel said the most difficult thing to bear in her antipod mission is the ridicule from people who are pro-weed: “We are called ‘reefer madness prohibitionists.’” She “can’t count the times” that people have said Andy must have “just used a bad batch” the night of his suicide.

But Schindel, Robinson, Adams and other moms plan to push forward, finding inspiration from others: “We have moms who credit Moms Strong with being influential in their sons’ marijuana addiction recovery,” said Schindel.

“If we can help save the life of another mom’s child,” she said, “we have done all we can now do for our own sons.”