
THE WORLD DRUG **PERCEPTION** PROBLEM

Countering prejudices about people who use drugs

2017 REPORT - TESTIMONIES OF PEOPLE WHO USE(D) DRUGS



TESTIMONIES

Edmond S. Fehoko, New Zealand

I am currently pursuing a PhD in Public Health at the Auckland University of Technology. My parents migrated to New Zealand from Ha'apai, Tonga and the connection to my heritage is important for me both personally and in my academic work: my master's thesis explored the experiences and perceptions of 12 New Zealand-born Tongan males participating in the faikava (kava drinking circle). I can vividly recall when I participated in my first kava circle at my local church with my father, at the age of 14. When I consume kava, I feel sociable, yet at peace, with stress levels gradually subsiding, resulting in a state of tranquility.

Kava circles are a social and cultural space where Pacific communities, including Tongans, gather to share ideas, knowledge and experiences whilst drinking kava as a means of (re)connecting back to the Pacific homelands. Kava is a drink made from the roots of the kava plant and it is well known and recognized within the Pacific for its mythical, narcotic, spiritual, medicinal and cultural value. Kava is a light anesthetic with anti-fungal qualities. It has been scientifically proven that kava also has mild antibiotic attributes. Kava has been a remedy, which has been used for illnesses such as headaches, leprosy, insomnia, migraine, tuberculosis and menstrual problems for female kava drinkers in Fiji. Thus, known for its medicinal properties, kava is considered as the "most imported and important psychoactive plant in the Pacific."

Reactions to my use of kava have been both positive and negative. Positive reactions include when it is seen as an alternative to alcohol consumption. Kava has a different intoxication effect than alcohol. It generates a warm pleasant and cheerful, but lazy, feeling, making people sociable without ineptness or interference with their reasoning. Kava use is also seen in a positive light as a diversion from possible youth gang affiliation. And my family appreciates the

role it plays in ensuring my fluency and understanding of the Tongan language and culture and in engaging in harmonious talanoa (dialogue) with others in the circle.

On the downside, sometimes, after a long night of kava, my mind can be a bit lethargic. Negative stigma is linked to the time spent at a kava circle instead of with family or friends who do not use kava, which in some cases can mean that a father figure might lack at home. My wife and family have compared my participation and engagement in the kava circles to how British Ladies will gather and have tea parties or a group of academics will gather and drink coffee.

Winy, mother of Guillermo, Chile

My son Guillermo was born in 2001 with an undiagnosed genetic disorder. At 5 months old, he started having seizures. At first we thought it was sudden infant death syndrome, because in the beginning the principal manifestation of a seizure was that Guillermo stopped breathing in his sleep. It was only when he was two years old that the doctors realized he was having epileptic seizures. We tried everything: a variety of medication, special diets, even brain surgery (callosotomy). Nothing helped. His refractory epilepsy was so bad it got to the point where he had an electrical discharge in his brain every 5 seconds.

In 2013 I started to read articles about cannabis oil and tried unsuccessfully to obtain some from the US. It was only a year later, when I heard about a foundation in Chile that helps in cases like his, that we actually got the oil for the first time. When I started giving it to him, Guillermo did not have seizures for 7 days. Then they returned, but much less frequently. Before he would have about 10 generalized tonic-clonic seizures a day; during the first treatment with cannabis oil he would have only 1 or 2.

In Chile, under the law 20.000, the cultivation and use of cannabis for personal or medical use is allowed. In 2015 the law was adapted, and now the import, sale and scientific investigation of cannabis extracts are also allowed.



The pharmacies sell two products, but one bottle, which would last about 7-10 days for Guillermo, costs 200,000 Chilean Pesos [about US\$300] while the monthly minimum wage is 270,000 pesos [about US\$420].

To be able to provide Guillermo with the medical cannabis, I grow cannabis at home and then extract the resin – which works better for him than oil. In 2015, I found what I call the “magic strain,” the most effective for my son. Guillermo did not have seizures for 4 months and then only had one every 10 days on average. It worked for almost 1 ½ years. Today, I continue to grow cannabis and look for the next magic strain. I never doubt what I am doing. I would do anything for my son that is not a crime. And by that I mean stealing or killing someone. How can it be a crime to grow something in my garden? Even though, in theory, what I do is legal in Chile, I am still afraid that the police might raid my home, claim that I am cultivating to sell, and take away the plants that I need for my son.

My family was shocked at first that I wanted to grow cannabis since it has a bad reputation. Only my mother stood by me. But when they saw the improvement in Guillermo’s health, they came around. Same with the doctor. He initially said I was crazy to want to try this but I went ahead and kept him updated. Then one day he read an article in a medical journal about cannabis and epilepsy and changed his mind. He even wrote an article himself, using Guillermo and another patient as case studies, and sent other patients to see me so I could explain to them how to use medical cannabis. I find that things are happening in the reverse order: normally there should be scientific investigation and then a treatment is given to patients. Here, the patients are doing the experimentation and finding the best way to treat their conditions.

Carmen, Germany

When I was 16, a friend helped her older brother bake “space cookies,” i.e. cookies with hashish, and she shared a few with me and some friends. It was a

pretty intense experience. We had cannabis in baked goods or hot chocolate a few times and later, when I had started smoking cigarettes, I also started smoking joints. We would share a joint when going out or sometimes if a whole group of us was at a friend’s place. We would put some money together, each chipping in 10 Deutschmarks or so and a friend would buy the hashish in “bulk” for our group, enough for a couple of weeks or a month, as many dealers would not sell less than 5 or 10g. We would then split it up. It was only much later that I realized that what we were doing is called “social dealing” and that the friend whose turn it was to buy could have been considered as a low-level drug trafficker. I continued smoking joints while at university, mostly on weekends. Over the years, as I went out less and less, I also smoked less and less cannabis.

As I grew up in Bavaria – the federal state that enforces drug control policies most strictly within Germany – we were afraid of getting caught even with the equivalent of one joint and would only smoke in the car around the corner from the night club or at a friend’s place before going out. Luckily none of us ever got into trouble with the police.

I am now married with three kids, work part-time in a job related to the field I did my degree in, and cannabis no longer has a place in my life – with the possible exception of a weekend trip with friends from high school every two years or so: there we might still smoke a joint to prove to ourselves that we are still “young.”

Nicolas Manbode, Mauritius

I started using cannabis at the age of 16, and at 18 I started to inject heroin. As long as I could hide it from my family, everything was okay and my consumption was only on a recreational basis. I started working at a very young age in the construction sector with my dad. Construction is a tough world. Sometimes you get a contract and lots of work and sometimes not. At the end of one of our projects, we had no job, so I stayed home almost every day with not much to do and I started to inject more regularly.



I got arrested for the first time for possession of heroin at 21. At this point, my life changed completely. I had no job, no money and my drug consumption became a problem. There were more and more police cases against me, making my life more difficult each day.

At the age of 27, I had enough of this life, of spending my life in and out of prison. It was hard and I couldn't take it anymore. It was not the life I wanted to have. Being incarcerated is hard, drug consumption was also very hard, I wanted to quit. I tried several detox centers and abstinence-based treatment centers but none of them worked for me. The treatments were for 2 weeks. When I got home from them nothing had changed in my neighborhood and I went back to using. I then decided to try methadone treatment but before being able to start, in 2010, I was sentenced to 2 years' incarceration. In the prison, I learned that I was co-infected, with HIV and hepatitis. It was a shock. When I was released from prison in 2011, I started on a methadone program and stayed on it for two years. This program worked for me. During those two years, I was supported. I had an objective and I stuck to it. Abstinence only had not worked for me; I needed medical follow-up also. I wanted to focus mainly on my health and then I started to gradually decrease the methadone doses. It took me 3 months until I finally stopped in 2013.

Things got better with my family. They saw the effort I made to quit. I started to get some work with contractors within my family. The trust that was once lost was reinstated. But it did not last long. The stuff I had done caught up with me. In 2015, I received the verdict of a police case which had been pending since 2008. I was again sentenced to two years of prison.

Luckily, and with the help and intervention of many, the sentence was changed to community service. When I had decided to quit, I had started volunteering in several organizations and this helped me a lot. But on the professional side it was hard, my clients terminated their contracts. But I didn't go under, I persevered. At this same time, a local NGO,

the Collectif Urgence Toxida (CUT), was looking for an outreach team leader for its peer unit. I applied and today I still work with them.

If I hadn't been through all that, I wouldn't be who I am today; it forged my personality. When I think about the time when I was injecting drugs, I know that I wouldn't have gone to prison and be co-infected if it had not been for the drugs. With time, I have developed good self-esteem and I am more confident in what I am doing. I want to help others through harm reduction programs, and I think that if I hadn't been through all this, I would have never gone on to help others. And today, whether society thinks good or bad about me, it doesn't affect me.

Oxana, Russian Federation

I had been addicted to heroin for several years, but I was coping. I dreamed of having a child. I managed not to use drugs for two years before I became pregnant. I was happy and went to the doctors for pre-natal care. In the hospital, I was stunned when I was told that I would not be able to give birth, because I had used drugs and was HIV positive. I was upset, beyond words. My dream fell apart.

In my country you can get an abortion for free for up to 12 weeks. After that, you have to pay and it's only done in special cases. So I started looking for money for an abortion. Maybe there's another way to have it done for free, but the doctors didn't tell me. I cried all the time and stopped eating. I wanted to kill myself. I got pulled back into drugs, and grew so thin my body was little more than a skeleton. I wrote a letter to my sister, preparing to die.

To get an abortion at this late stage, I had to get a certificate from the narcology department [the Russian branch of medicine dealing with drug addiction] that I was a drug addict. But in my country they don't accept pregnant women in narcology: methadone substitution therapy which can help drug-dependent women during pregnancy is banned in Russia, and official detox programs are off-limits to pregnant women – because the drugs used are toxic to the fetus.



The narcology staff only agreed to take me in after they learned that I would later have an abortion. Then, on the eve of my abortion, I found out from my girlfriends that when you are HIV positive it is entirely possible to give birth to healthy babies. So that means everything I'd just been through was purely at the whim of the doctors?!

I announced that I was having the child! The staff at the clinic yelled at me, calling me an irresponsible junkie, and they didn't want to return my money for the procedure. Due to everything I'd been through, I went into labor prematurely, and at 28 weeks I had a beautiful, healthy baby girl, Julia. It was such a joy, even though it came at such a heavy price.

I filed a complaint against the doctors. Then the police came to my home to harass me. They had an anonymous tip-off that I was neglecting my baby. So it looks like the doctors had the last laugh.

Nevertheless, our happiness lasted just over two years. I found a job to earn money for Julia. Taking care of her took a lot of my energy. I was tired at work, and when I came home, I had to deal with my scolding relatives, who took care of my daughter while I was away. Soon, Julia's father died and things got a lot more difficult. Problems at work, problems at home, the father's death and how everybody shunned – I just broke. It drove me back into using drugs. Then the police came to my house again, with a fake warrant for drugs. They searched the house but didn't find anything. So they took some sugar from the cupboard, poured it on the table, called witnesses and told them they had found drugs. Then at the station, they snuck a syringe between my things.

I was given a sentence of three years and three months in a prison colony. The drug control service published an article on their website, portraying me as a horrible monster and revealed my drug dependency and HIV status. The article was removed only after I wrote a complaint to the prosecutor's office, but it was too late: almost all of my friends and relatives had read it.

I have been at the camp for one year now, two more to go. We work almost every day, with no days off. My HIV treatment is irregular as the supply of anti-retroviral drugs is intermittent at the camp. I'm worried about my health. I don't dare to think about my daughter or I'll start to cry. I only dream of one thing – to see Julia again. To never be separated again. But if you're a junkie, you can never guarantee that something won't destroy your plans.

Eva, United States of America

In my early twenties, I was a very successful drug addict. I was living in New York City, working as a freelance magazine writer, and producing articles for well-known publications. I was well-known. I went to fancy parties with velvet ropes and interviewed many people who were world-renowned in the fields that I covered. I was often drunk, hung-over, or high on cocaine but took care to not let that affect the quality of my work.

I recognize that I grew up with a tremendous amount of privilege. I went to an Ivy League university, which is where I first discovered cocaine. I remember saying to a friend, "I should never try it because I know I'll like it." I loved anything that made me feel strong and sharp and smart and amped. The first time I tried cocaine was with two friends, both very wealthy, both very successful – it didn't seem like a huge deal. Everyone had access to it; a few of the cool kids would travel to New York, get some grams and bring them back for special events; then for regular weekends, and then just for regular weekdays.

When I had moved to New York to work in publishing, a friend of mine introduced me to his dealer. I understood, in an abstract way, that cocaine was illegal, but it didn't seem like that big of a deal. I had to text a number and ask for however many "tickets" (= grams of cocaine) I wanted. When my regular dealer was not available, I'd have to call a different one. I remember one night getting into the front seat of an SUV in the East Village. I had started turning around when a voice in the back said, "Don't turn around."



I had to just put my hand out and he dropped the bags of cocaine into it. I gave the guy in the front my cash and got out.

There were times when I didn't have enough money; I would still call the dealer and try and get a discount. This never worked; but I heard about women who traded sexual favors for drugs. I didn't, and I'm glad that I didn't.

I got sober when I was 24. I thought that cocaine was my problem but I realized that whenever I drank, I wanted to buy drugs. I haven't had a drink or taken a drug in ten years.

I strongly believe in legal regulation. There was no way that I could have avoided cocaine: my temperament, my financial access, etc. It would have been easier for me to be safe and not have to get into terrifying situations in cars if there had been some legal way for me to access drugs.

There were so many times that I knew what I was taking was cut with something, but I was desperate and so I did it anyway. After I got sober I developed a ton of health problems; sometimes I wonder if those were related, in part, to using impure drugs for so long.

I'm grateful to be sober, but I'm also grateful for having experienced being a drug addict. It gives me so much more compassion and a wider depth of understanding of the randomness of who becomes an addict and who doesn't. Almost all of my friends also used cocaine, but at a certain point before their use caused problems they stopped. I couldn't.

Teresa, Portugal

My name is Teresa, I'm 22 years old and I live in Lisbon, Portugal. I just completed my studies in social work. I love animals and am a fan of psy trance music.

It may be hard to believe, but I don't drink alcohol (ever) and I don't smoke cannabis. However, I'm a tobacco smoker and I occasionally (3-5 times a year) do illegal drugs. My favorite ones are speed (amphetamines), ecstasy (MDMA) and 2C-B, but I've

also tried LSD, magic mushrooms, cocaine, mephedrone, and others.

I used to take a lot more drugs than I do now, but over time I learned to choose the right moments. I used to like psychedelics a lot, but nowadays I prefer stimulants. I always do a lot of research about the drugs I consume, and about the best way to do them – regarding the amounts, routes of administration and interactions between them.

All my friends know about this; I don't hide it from them because I'm not ashamed of it and I consider it to be an important part of my life. I would say that my family has some suspicions about my drug use but we never talk about it. Even though I'm sure it doesn't negatively affect my life, I know my family would be disappointed if I admitted it.

Fortunately, I am young enough never to have had to deal with criminalization of my use – in Portugal in 2001 all drugs were decriminalized for personal use. It would be nice to have a permanent place where I could have my drugs tested for purity/content before taking them, so that I would know for sure what I'm putting in my body. Drug checking is allowed under the Portuguese law, and we have it at some music festivals, but there isn't a permanent location that is open all year. This means that no matter how much I try to learn about the drugs I take, it can always go wrong because buying them on the street I don't really know what I'm taking.

Anonymous, Ghana

My neighbors and friends affectionately call me Togoman. I am 53 years old and was a cassava farmer [cassava, also known as yuca, manioc, is a major staple food in West Africa and other parts of the tropics]. I started using marijuana at the age of 19 and still do. I do not consider myself a problematic user. The herb is good, it helps me relax and carry on my work. I am a cool man, I don't drink alcohol and I don't fight in my community. I used to take the herb after a hard day's work to help me relax my aching body and once I take my herb, I eat and sleep.



I would always plant the herb [cannabis] among my cassava crops for personal use and I used to also provide it to some of my fellow farmers. Six years ago, a friend who I often smoked with informed the police about my drug use. I was arrested and charged for possession. I was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison. I have already done 6 years, 2 years on remand at Akuse prison and 4 years at the Nsawam medium security prison.

The sale of marijuana within prison walls is even higher than what goes on in open society. So while in prison, I am still able to purchase some from fellow prisoners peddling the drug – when I have money. But you need to be careful not to get caught, otherwise you will be given further punishment while serving your term.

Since my arrest and incarceration, life has been very difficult for me and my family. I am really suffering in prison, it is really tough for me. Prison is not a joke. Going to prison is like a dark cloud for me and my family. It has completely shattered the dreams of my children. They have dropped out of school.

My first son, Korshie, was in high school and his younger sister was in junior high school. Both had to drop out of school because there was nobody to pay for their education. Our landlord sacked my family from our residence because my unemployed wife could not afford the annual rent. My boy, Korshie, ended up on the street, as a hawker. My daughter got pregnant and that ended her ambitions. That in all honesty crushed my family.

I pray something is done about the law regarding marijuana. I have never had a problem while using marijuana, neither have I heard someone has died taking the herb. Day in day out we hear about people dying of drinking *akpeteshie* [an alcoholic spirit produced in Ghana] yet it is allowed to be sold to people. So why can't they allow us to take our herb? I think authorities must take a second look at the law and consider making it legal for people to use it. I think they should allow for people who desire to produce the substance to do so with close

monitoring. I am not a criminal, I am a peace-loving citizen of Ghana. I have never stolen, killed or done anything bad.

AS, Malaysia

My name is AS and I'm 38 years old. I'm from Pahang. I have been using drugs for almost 20 years. I inject and smoke and chase all kinds of drugs, but heroin and ice are my main drugs of choice. I've been sentenced to drug detention centers 8 times and 19 times to prison. My life is difficult and I worry about being arrested by the police and being sentenced to the death penalty.

Because of my daily drug use, I am myself a small drug dealer. This pays for my daily consumption, a little bit of food, rent for my room, and a little bit of extra things that can let me enjoy life sometimes. I don't make much money from dealing and if I had a choice to make, I would not be a drug dealer. In Malaysia, if you are arrested with 15g or more of heroin or morphine, or 200g or more of cannabis, you risk the death penalty. This should not happen – nobody should die for possession of drugs. I am not like a murderer or a traitor to the nation.

My family accepted me as a drug user and I managed to take drugs in the house with my mother's permission. But this was a long time ago and I chose not to go back to my house as I am not doing as well as they expected. I was married off when I was 20 years old: it was an arranged marriage. My marriage lasted 10 years and I have twin daughters. I had to let my wife and daughters go because of the pressure from my in-laws during my time in jail. Now I rarely meet my daughters, because of my drug problem.

The same goes for society. People always look at me as if I am useless, like some kind of garbage. They don't trust people who use drugs. They don't see me as a human being. At the moment, I am trying my best to survive in my daily life by doing all kinds of jobs offered by IKHLAS [a local Community-Based Organization], like unloading trucks, or cleaning jobs.



But this is not enough to take care of my bills and I have to resort to dealing to make ends meet.

Society will always have a bad perception of us – the drug users. We are a burden for them. But did society ever think what would happen if drug problems concerned their own family members? Society needs to be informed about drug issues. They must know that they don't need to hang drug dealers, or those caught in the street with small amounts of heroin or cannabis for personal use. I am not selling because I want to, but because there is no other choice.

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