

## **“Alternatives to Drugs” As a Part of Comprehensive Efforts to Ameliorate the Drug Abuse Problem**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The author discusses the trend in drug abuse prevention efforts toward promoting alternatives to drug-taking behavior. The alternatives approach is an integral part of comprehensive efforts to deal with the problem. The approaches which are most worthy of attention promote social and psychological health while responding to the wide range of unmet needs and unfulfilled aspirations which underlie drug-taking behavior. Certain current approaches have either negligible or questionable effects or decidedly harmful effects on psychological and social well being and their continued support would be both unwise and impolitic. The author suggests that the same kind of orientation toward psychological and social health which characterizes the most effective and promising alternatives should be reflected in all efforts to intervene at every stage of the drug-taking cycle if such efforts are to have lasting and beneficial results.

Providing alternatives to drugs is a recently emerging trend in drug abuse prevention efforts. The “alternatives to drugs” approach needs to be viewed in terms of its role in comprehensive efforts to deal with the drug problem. To develop a context for discussing the alternatives trend, it would be helpful to begin with a description of what can be called the cyclic potential of drug-taking behavior. Following this description is a brief discussion of the relationship between various stages of this

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cycle and specific kinds of approaches required in ameliorating the drug abuse problem.

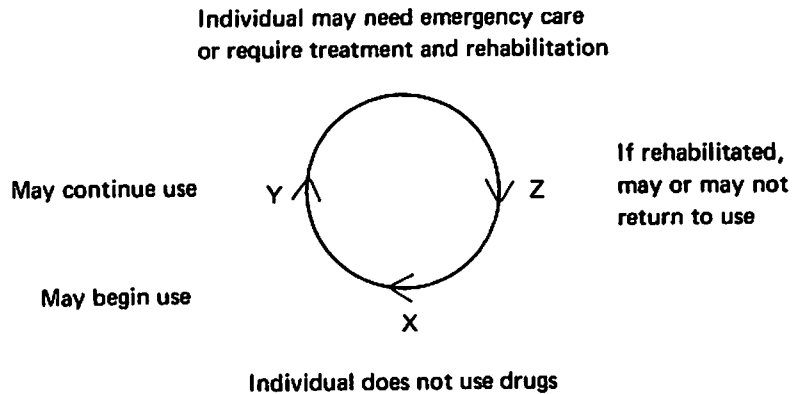


Figure 1. The cyclic potential of drug-taking behavior.

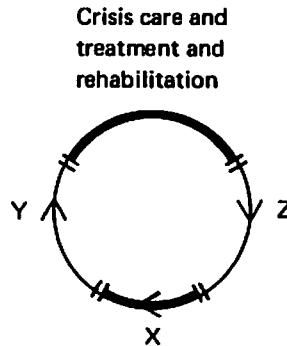
An individual at point X (Figure 1) does not use drugs. If he begins to experiment, he may continue to use drugs and become a casual user or a chronic user. In the case of psychologically or physiologically habituating drugs, he can become drug dependent. He may at some point require emergency care or he may come to a stage where extensive treatment and rehabilitation are required (beginning at point Y). If an individual undergoes treatment and rehabilitation he may, if rehabilitated, reach a stage when he is once again drug free (point Z). Between Y and Z, however, if the needs or conditions which led the individual to use drugs in the first place remain unsatisfied or unchanged, if other needs arise, or if the individual's ability to deal with these needs and conditions has not significantly improved, then the chances of his reverting to drug use and beginning the cycle again are great.

#### The Need To Provide Services And Viable Approaches For Persons At Every Point In The Drug-Taking Cycle

A comprehensive approach to ameliorating the drug abuse problem must be designed to provide services and effective approaches for individuals at every point in the cycle. Approaches in the past seem to have been directed at two primary areas:

1. treating and rehabilitating those who require extensive care, and treating those who require emergency care, and
2. rather ineffectual efforts aimed at trying to prevent drug-taking behavior in the first place. Most of these efforts have been strongly cognitively oriented with a recent increase in emphasis on the affective domain—developing awareness and understanding, changing attitudes and values, and concentrating on the role of these in behavior and in the decision-making process.

In terms of the cycle of drug-taking behavior described above, these kinds of approaches have tended to deal with fairly restricted areas of the drug-taking cycle. (See Figure 2.)



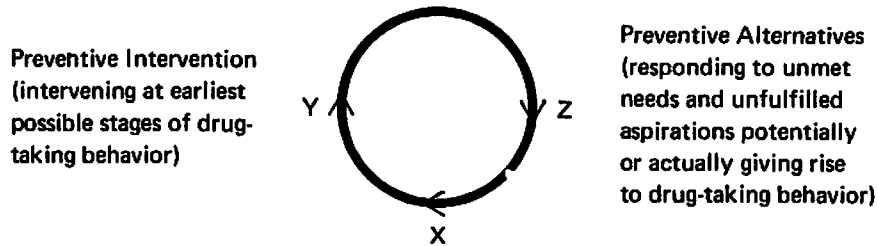
Educational and informational approaches to prevention

Figure 2. Typical approach to dealing with the drug abuse problem.

Typically certain areas have been effectively ignored or overlooked. These include early intervention in drug-taking behavior and approaches to drug abuse prevention which have long term beneficial effects on attitudes, values, and behavior—approaches which respond to unmet needs and unfulfilled aspirations underlying drug-taking behavior.

A truly comprehensive approach concentrating on all of these needs should supplant current, more typical efforts concentrating on isolated aspects of drug-taking behavior (dealing primarily with advanced symptoms or with earliest stages of prevention). The kinds of approaches and direct services involved in such a comprehensive approach could be depicted as shown in Figure 3.

**Crisis Care and Treatment and Rehabilitation  
(including vocational rehabilitation)**



Cognitively and affectively oriented approaches to prevention

Figure 3. A comprehensive approach to the drug abuse problem.

**The Alternatives Approach to Drug-Taking Behavior**

Thus far most efforts to deal with the drug abuse problem in any kind of a comprehensive way have left much to be desired. In recent years, however, various missing pieces of the puzzle have begun to be sought out, found, and are now beginning to be put in place. The trend toward promoting alternatives to drug taking reflects such a process. The discussion which follows deals with some of the problems and the potentials of the alternatives trend and with the bearing that this approach has upon the nature and direction of all other aspects of comprehensive efforts to ameliorate the drug abuse problem.

**"Alternatives" And Its Various Meanings**

The alternatives approach to drug taking or to drug abuse means different things to different people. To one person alternatives may encompass efforts to:

- increase the relevancy of school curricula to the lives of students,
- humanize the educational process generally,
- improve vocational opportunities,
- humanize the work situation,
- enrich people's lives,
- generally enhance the quality of life

to others, alternatives refers to:

- programs, policies, and approaches which provide for afterhours use of schools, churches, and community facilities for a wide range of activities and programs;
- programs providing opportunities for volunteer efforts and apprenticeship involvement in such areas as child care, teaching, tutoring, counseling, social work, paramedical occupations, caring for and working with underprivileged, the aged, the handicapped, etc., social service occupations in general, ecology, agriculture, business, technical trades, etc.;
- programs promoting character development and self development, and the development of interpersonal competencies in growth oriented ways, including the development of spiritual and other ideals and aspirations;
- programs opening up career and employment opportunities;
- programs and activities aimed at providing opportunities for socializing and recreation;
- programs stressing athletics, physical fitness and development;
- opportunities for developing artistic abilities and sensitivities and competencies in the fields of arts and crafts.

To still others, "alternatives" may be thought of as "one for one" substitutes for drug induced experiences or drug oriented life styles. Some of these "alternatives" include group and individual experiments and experiences such as group therapy, encounter groups, attack therapy, sensitivity training, communal living, and certain kinds of behavior which can be construed as being morally questionable. Also included may be types of activities which involve cultivating occult and other unusual sensations, moods, and "powers" including such things as kundalini yoga, black magic, trance states, regressive hypnosis, spiritualism (mediumship and seances), the cultivation of extra-sensory perception, brain wave regulation, and electrode stimulation. Because of the decidedly harmful effects (characterologically, if not psychologically and socially) that can result from involvement in these kinds of experiments and the cultivation of such experiences and because of the many negative implications that the promotion of such activities has for the stability of society generally, it is most important that indiscriminate

support not be lent to anything and everything which is promoted as or which appears to be an "alternative" to drugs. While individuals, particularly adults, have great freedom over what they choose to do with their bodies and their minds and lives generally, it would seem important that public funds not be used to promote activities directed toward youth or adults which have either negligible or negative personal and social effects or value or are of a questionable moral character.

Experimentation with and involvement in any and all kinds of activities and experiences can prove as detrimental to spiritual, mental, and physical health as experimenting with or using drugs. The goal of an alternatives approach should not be to replace drug taking with just anything; the goal should be to replace drug taking with something which has the long term effect of promoting personal and spiritual well being and growth, while helping to satisfy and fulfill the unmet needs and aspirations which are giving rise to drug-taking behavior in the first place.

#### **Consequences of Failing to be Discriminating In Promoting "Alternatives to Drugs" Approaches**

It is important that in planning and implementing programs which would promote alternatives to drug taking that consideration be given to the political feasibility as well as the social and psychological consequences of promoting certain types of alternatives. Unless a discriminating approach is taken, resources which could have been better used may, in effect, be wasted. Worse yet, such resources may actually be used to bring about results opposite to those intended. They may lead to an undermining of mental health, an increase in disillusionment, alienation, frustration, confusion, *anomie*, etc. When a lack of positive results becomes apparent, support is apt to be withdrawn. The gathering of support for other innovative, but viable, alternatives approaches may well meet with resistance on the part of decision and opinion-makers who have become cynical concerning the efficacy of all such approaches, if not adamantly opposed to them.

#### **Expanding the Concept of Alternatives To Address a Wider Spectrum of Needs**

The interest in and the growing support for "alternatives to drugs" is most typically seen in terms of the unmet social, ego,

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and self-actualization needs of the white middle class youth. The concept of alternatives should be expanded to encompass the whole spectrum of unmet needs which give rise to drug-taking behavior irrespective of heritage or socioeconomic level. Unmet survival needs, as well as unmet social and other needs of those persons coming from lower socioeconomic levels deserve far greater attention than they have thus far been given. To introduce a crafts program in a ghetto or barrio where basic survival needs are going unmet does very little to get at the underlying causes and the unmet needs giving rise to drug-taking behavior, as well as to other asocial and antisocial behavior in that community. While such programs do constitute a step in the right direction, efforts must not stop there. While a crafts program can provide much needed diversion and serve some beneficial therapeutic and recreational needs, and provide a much needed outlet for expression, it alone cannot address deeper unmet needs. Other types of approaches are also needed. As long as the need for decent living conditions, food, clothing, education, employment, humane treatment, and humanized relationships with others are going unmet, little real progress towards the ultimate amelioration of the drug problem or of any of the other major social ills plaguing the ghetto or the barrio or other depressed areas can be expected.

### **The Essential Characteristics of Viable Alternatives**

A responsiveness to a wide range of human needs coupled with a genuine attitude of care should characterize all truly viable alternatives approaches. No matter what a person's unmet needs are, the presence of such a caring and responsive attitude is most essential in promoting personal and social well being and fulfillment. It is the essential antidote to the dehumanization, alienation, and absence of worthwhile purpose which threatens personal and social health and happiness regardless of socioeconomic level. Because dehumanization, alienation, and directionlessness play such major roles in the increasing incidence of drug experimentation, use, dependence, and addiction, "alternatives to drugs" must, in effect, promote that which is essentially human, conducive to balance, harmony, and health, and worthy of human attention and effort.

It is essential that care be taken to see that all efforts aimed at preventing drug-taking behavior or intervening at any stage of

the drug-taking cycle—from the earliest to the latest stages—reflect a similarly responsive and humanistic approach. Only in this way can the drug abuse problem ultimately be ameliorated.

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