

Behind the Mask: Youth THC Use, Mental Health, and Parenting

By Nicolle Goldfinger, Psy.D.

There continues to be a rise in the number of adolescents and young adults experiencing emotional, behavioral, and cognitive events due to the use of today's high-potency THC cannabis products. While many recognize the cognitive effects associated with cannabis use, cannabis-induced psychosis has become a prominent mental health condition that many continue to ignore and under-report. Symptoms of cannabis-induced psychosis include psychotic features such as losing touch with reality, paranoia, delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking and speech, as well as anxiety and overall agitation.

Through my clinical work with clients and families over the past few years, I have seen an increase in psychotic features brought on by the use of today's marijuana. We're seeing that today's high-THC content, often with potencies as high as 90%, negatively impacts the under-developed brain. When clients come to me with these features, they almost always have only one substance in their system: highly potent strains of THC.

THC, the psychoactive substance in cannabis, can disrupt normal brain signaling related to perception and reality testing, often triggering psychotic symptoms. Many individuals can "mask" these symptoms early on, hiding them from others, but as the drug use continues, the symptoms intensify and can become dangerous and life threatening to oneself and/or others. Recognizing this feature of psychosis is important.

Masking is when individuals consciously or unconsciously hide part of their thoughts, feelings or behaviors to fit in with others. While using substances, masking may include minimizing how often or how much of the substance you use, acting "normal" (despite being high), using eye drops/gum to conceal use, avoiding conversations about mood or behavior changes, and attributing anxiety or sleep disturbances to causes other than the substance itself.

In my experience, many adolescents and young adults become very skilled at masking, especially if they are trying to maintain school, work, or family expectations. I have also seen masking as a mismatch between what is reported by the individual and what is observed by others, which include withdrawal, irritability, and overall changes in functioning. In other words, a client may state that they are "fine," but their behaviors

say otherwise. Many adolescents and young adults using substances may mask to avoid judgement, stigma or rejection by others and to feel accepted by their peers. It is crucial that parents recognize these changes with their son or daughter in order to take appropriate action and seek professional guidance. Moreover, it remains critical that parents understand the negative behaviors and emotions associated with cannabis use and the “changes” they are witnessing within their child or loved one. Early intervention is key. Establishing a strong therapeutic alliance with the client and trust with the family is vital to success in treating this condition.

In working with one family, a father shared, “I had no idea that my son was in psychosis until he shared his inner thoughts and fears within a family session. We had no idea how much marijuana he was using and believed he was going through a phase with his friends during his senior year of high school. Having him meet with you, in a supportive and non-judgmental environment allowed him to be honest with how often he was using and what he was experiencing. We had no idea how much fear and denial were impacting our son. I am grateful that we learned how important early intervention is and the importance of continuing treatment and care.”

Many parents may lack psychoeducation around the dangers associated with marijuana and other drug use, and what psychosis symptoms entail. I remain enthusiastic about parent education as I have seen clients recover with familial support and strong boundaries. I believe it is crucial to collaborate closely with the family, recognizing the critical role of parents as part of the recovery process. Parents have to truly understand the dangers associated with today’s high-potency marijuana products and when to intervene.

As a professional in the mental health field, I remain dedicated and committed to working closely with parents to help them fully comprehend the impacts of high-potency THC on the brain, as well as helping them identify the signs, psychotic features and behavioral changes in the impacted loved one’s overall thought process. Having worked with some parents who are part of the Parent Action Network, I remain dedicated to ongoing treatment and education and hope to continue to empower parents and loved ones with my clinical expertise in addictions, helping them understand the need to respond effectively and early. I am honored to have connected with the Parent Action Network through a parent who trusted me with her son and am willing to speak with any parent or loved one reading this feature who might be interested in some assistance or guidance.

About the author: Nicolle Goldfinger, Psy.D. has over 15 years of experience in the field of mental health and substance use treatment, Dr. Goldfinger currently works in private practice in Delray Beach,

Florida. She specializes in treating individuals navigating co-occurring disorders, providing compassionate evidence-based care tailored to each client's individual needs. Her clinical work focuses on helping clients manage anxiety, depression, trauma and substance related challenges , with a strong emphasis on building resilience and long-term recovery. Dr. Goldfinger has worked in diverse settings, most recently a dual diagnosis facility specializing in complex mental health issues and substance abuse disorders. She has extensive experience working at all levels of care including; residential. partial hospitalization, intensive outpatient as well as outpatient care.

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