Will pot soothe my feelings of depression and anxiety? [1]

Dear Alice,

I really want to try pot because I am SICK of being uptight and careful all the time. I have been depressed and anxious for several years and I just want to feel SOMETHING different. But I've had a couple of panic attacks (both related to medication) and they were the most frightening things I've ever experienced. I'm scared that pot would do the same thing to me. What do you think? I know you can't encourage me to smoke pot but I would very much appreciate an honest answer, which I know you always give. (I know that smoking pot is not the best thing to do when you have depression and anxiety, but it would only be once, and I would be with friends. By the way, I'm not currently on medication as I find it useless. But I'm not trying to self-medicate. I just want to remember what it's like to experience an emotion that is not depression or anxiety). Thank you very much.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It can be extremely difficult to feel anxious, depressed, and seemingly unable to make things better. Your desire to find a solution is a great first step, but instead of making you feel better, using pot has the potential to make things worse.

Whether or not pot can actually cause panic attacks is still unclear from the research. However, studies have shown that daily marijuana use is correlated with significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety, an increase in suicidal thoughts, and greater risk for schizophrenia later in life. The idea that using pot will calm your nerves may hold true for some but for those like yourself who suffer from depression and/or anxiety, repeated use has the potential to make your symptoms worse and possibly lead to substance misuse or dependence. Your intention to try pot one time may not produce these effects, but they are certainly something to keep in mind since your goal is to avoid feeling depressed and anxious. In the related Q&As below, there are additional questions about marijuana use and its relation to depression and anxiety, which may be of interest to you.

Some studies have found that using pot even one time can elevate one's anxiety level, especially during the high. The risk of this happening is greater if you are in an unfamiliar or stressful environment when you smoke, if you are already in a not-so-good mood before you start smoking, and if you are new to pot. One study found that 22% of marijuana users reported panic attacks. In the same study, women were twice as likely as men to report panic.
attacks. So if you still feel determined to try it, be around people you trust (which it sounds like you will be) and be in a good mood. This is because pot often serves as an "intensifier," amplifying whatever pre-existing feeling you have. Even if you have a good experience with it, please keep in mind that it is not a long-term solution to your anxiety and could make it worse over time.

Instead of focusing on why pot may not be the best option, let's discuss some alternatives. Have you tried meditation? Some find meditation useful in relieving anxiety. You may also want to look into additional mind-body practices such as yoga or tai-chi from the Go Ask Alice! archives. For additional information, check out the related Go Ask Alice! question, Can I treat depression on my own? And what about adding regular aerobic exercise to your treatment regimen if you haven't done so already? Research shows that this may help to decrease anxiety and depression.

You mention that meds aren't doing the trick. Has your health care provider tried prescribing different types? Unfortunately, sometimes trial and error is required to find the right type and dosage. But with or without meds, a counselor or therapist may be able to help you explore ways to address the frustrating feelings you're experiencing. Even though "medicinal marijuana" has become a hot topic in the media and politics, there is little evidence that using pot helps with depression and anxiety.

Feeling stuck with such an upsetting problem may leave you searching for any possible solution, but your determination, along with support from health care providers, will likely help keep your depression, anxiety, and panic attacks in check. You can do it!

Alice!
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Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
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