LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF DRUGS ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH; COUNSELLING APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

Substance abuse and addiction have become global problems, especially among adolescents and young adults. Many young people develop addictions to other substances and stimulants with comparable effects to narcotics. Substance abuse is a significant concern within the medical profession, particularly for psychiatry, psychology, social workers, and researchers. Exposure to drug use and misuse has been shown to be related to adverse effects on physical and mental health. The data for this study was obtained through an online questionnaire. The Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drug Survey was the primary survey tool and was subsequently localized into Albanian. To meet the criteria of the survey, more questions were included. The survey was structured into eight sections. The questionnaire was composed of 32 statements, in total, 110 people. Our survey data shows that gatherings are the most common setting for cannabis use, followed by homes and schools.

Substances taken with a doctor's prescription are prone to abuse and misuse. 42% of respondents said that they have used a prescribed medication despite the fact that they did not have a doctor's prescription for it. Substance use disorder can lead to neglecting relationships, neglecting family, and confrontations or fights. It is essential to improve the education of our young people, and it is essential for clinicians to be mindful of whom they prescribe medications to.

Keywords: abuse, misuse, cannabis, psychoactive substances, mental health, counseling approaches, and programs

INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse and addiction have become global issues, particularly among teenagers and young people. Many young individuals develop addictions to other substances and stimulants with effects comparable to those of narcotics. Drug abuse is a major area of interest within the field of medicine, especially for psychiatry, psychology, counsellors and therapists, social workers, and researchers. Exposure to drug use and misuse has been shown to be related to adverse effects on physical and mental health. Drug abuse is a growing public health concern worldwide. However, determining drug use and misuse is technically challenging. Some examples of these drugs include alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, marijuana, and certain pain medicines.

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One of the most significant current discussions in drug misuse and addiction is what the most commonly used psychoactive substances are. Psychoactive drugs are medications or substances that alter the way the brain functions and result in changes in mood, consciousness, thoughts, feelings, or behavior. All psychoactive substances cause the brain's reward system to respond, which may induce euphoria and be addictive, so the brain wants that feeling back again and again.
The problem is that chronic exposure to these drugs leads to adaptive changes in the brain. Substance use disorder (SUD), as defined by the DSM-5, is characterized by recurrent patterns of symptoms related to substance use that lead to continued use despite adverse consequences. (By Gateway Foundation, 2021).
Mental health is a state of mind that is marked by mental well-being, good behavior adjustment, a lack of worry and other symptoms that make it hard to function, and the ability to form healthy relationships and deal with the everyday stresses and demands of life.(“Mental Health,” 2022)."State of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to his or her community," is how the World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health.There is a significant prevalence of mental diseases and disorders connected to the use of psychoactive substances across the whole world. These conditions are also substantial contributors to morbidity, disability, and early death. (Pan American Health Organisation, 2022)

Most of the time, the reason someone starts using a drug is straightforward, but it can becomecomplicated and change over time.One-fifth of drug usage is mostly for pleasure, which commonly manifests as a buzz or high, numbness, drowsiness, or comfort. Anxiety disorders are the most frequent type of psychiatric disorder, and many people use medicines (particularly alcohol and benzodiazepines) to manage their anxiety. A reasonably common reason for substance use is to alleviate physical symptoms such as pain. Controlling the availability of such drugs involves political action and substantial activity by law enforcement and other enforcement agencies to detect and restrict drug importation and distribution. (Geddes, Price, & McKnight, 2012). Substance abuse is defined as the use of a prescription substance for a purpose other than that for which it was provided, such as taking higher doses or more frequently than advised or taking someone else's medication. Substance abuse is defined as a pattern of using licit or illicit drugs that causes severe social, professional, and/or medical impairment. (Wecker, Taylor, & James, 2018, p. 202). Risk-taking is adaptive in adolescents because they are developing independence from their parents, forming relationships with and competing against their peers, engaging in sexual and romantic experimentation, and preparing for adult roles as parents and workers. Concurrently, though, many start taking chances with harmful medicines. (Thapar et al., 2015, p. 935)

There is mounting evidence that both short- and long-term BZD usage negatively impairs neurocognitive function. One of the most popular therapeutic medications used to treat anxiety and sleep disturbances is benzodiazepine (BZD). (Paul, 2020, pp. 262–263) Diazepam, flurazepam, oxazepam, and chlordiazepoxide are all benzodiazepines. Although some evidence suggests there may be an elevated risk for dementia, a recent meta-analysis found that the risk is higher for those using benzodiazepines with a longer half-life and for those who have been taking benzodiazepines for a longer duration (more than 3 years). (Boland, Verduin, & Ruiz, 2022, pp. 960–973) About a third of young people who use prescription medicines for nonmedical purposes (for example, to get high) may be at increased risk of developing symptoms of a prescription drug use problem, according to the available evidence. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EU body or agency), Benzodiazepine abuse has been linked to a wide variety of negative clinical and functional outcomes (such as suicide, physical health, etc.). The relationship between benzodiazepines and negative outcomes is intriguing, although it is often unclear whether this is due to the specific effects of benzodiazepines or to an overall worse drug use profile (such as increased polysubstance use). (Votaw, Geyer, Rieselbach, & McHugh, 2019).

The use of cannabis is the most common of all illicit drugs. The first use of cannabis has shifted to the middle to late adolescent years over the past 40 years in most modern cultures. Most young people use cannabis for the "high," a state of mild pleasure, relaxation, and altered perception that is common among cannabis users. The user's short-term memory and attention may deteriorate as a result of cognitive alterations, making it easy for them to drift off into pleasurable reverie and difficult for them to maintain goal-directed mental activity. (Boland, Verduin, & Ruiz, 2022, p. 930). Previous studies have shown that overall drug use in North Macedonia is still quite low. According to the results of a poll conducted in 2017, 8.2% of all individuals (15–64) and 15% of young adults (15–34) reported having used cannabis at some point in their lives. (Petrushevska, Prosheva, & Savik, 2022). Previous research conducted in North Macedonia indicates that cannabis is the most commonly used substance here. In that light, below are some responses to the question, "Why did you use herbal cannabis in the past year?" – Seventy-six percent of current users said they used herbal cannabis for relaxation and stress relief, while almost half of the users said they used it to get high, for fun, to help sleep, or to socialize. (Kjosevska & Prosheva, 2022).

Opioids are a broad category of psychoactive substances that can be either naturally occurring or synthetically produced. Opioids have a long history of use by humans as analgesics and for other medical uses, but they also have a lengthy history of abuse due to their psychoactive properties. (Boland, Verduin, & Ruiz, 2022, p.942) Even when the drug's initial effects wear off, chronic cannabis users still show deficiencies in neurocognitive functioning, according to a large body of research. (Paul, 2020, p. 263)

One of the greatest risk factors for disease burden is substance abuse, which includes both alcohol and drug use. (Lago et al., 2017). The calming and anxiety-relieving effects of alcohol, which are similar to those of benzodiazepines, are likely the consequence of its activity there. The pleasurable and addictive properties of alcohol may be due to its stimulation of dopaminergic pathways. (Freberg, 2019,pg.141).Recent news articles said that 250,000 people in Macedonia have a long-term problem with drinking and that 60,000 of them can be referred to as alcoholics.(“Drug Addiction and Treatment in Macedonia,” n.d.) This research looks at the ways in which our young people are misusing and abusing these substances, with the goal of uncovering the long-term effects of substance addiction on their mental health.

According to statistics from the Clinic of Toxicology, a total of 2237 acute poisonings with alcohol and psychotropic drugs were recorded between 2018 and 2020.In cases with alcohol poisoning, there is a substantial difference between the genders, with 79% of registered patients being male and 21% being female. Male patients had a higher percentage of acute poisonings from alcohol in combination with psychoactive substances (91% vs. 9% women), heroin (89% vs. 11% women), methadone (90% vs. 10% women), cocaine (94% vs. 6% women), amphetamines (94% vs. 6% women), marijuana (83% vs. 17% women), and alcohol + benzodiazepines (53% vs. 47% women). The incidence of acute poisonings caused by opioid analgesics and ecstasy was found to be evenly distributed between genders, with 50% of the cases being registered in men and 50% in women. The data indicates a greater incidence of acute poisonings among females, particularly in cases involving benzodiazepines, with 73% of such poisonings being reported in women as opposed to 27% in men. (Kostovska, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research

The main aim of the research is to see the current situation of the youths in using drugs, most common types of and the side effect that these drugs have on psychological and mental wellbeing and to emphasize the importance of the counselling approaches and programs for drug and substance abuse

The aim of the research is

1. To examine and see if Cannabis is the most popular illegal substance among young people in North Macedonia
2. To examine and see if youths takes drugs especially, taking benzodiazepines without a doctor's prescription?
3. To examine and see if they are aware of the side effects of substance use disorders on social life.
4. To emphasize the importance of counselling approaches and programs in drug abuse

Research Instruments

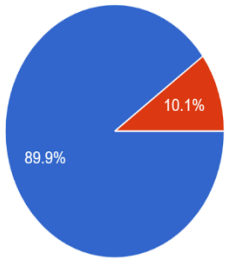
The data for this study was obtained through an online questionnaire. Survey was the primary survey tool and was subsequently localized into Albanian. To meet the criteria of the survey, more questions were included. For our purpose we used The Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drug questioner. The questionnaire was composed of 32 statements, which contribute to learning more about how young people are informed about substance use disorder, overuse, and possible negative impacts on mental health.The survey was structured in 8 sections: introduction section, informed consent section, personal profile section, marijuana-cannabis section, prescription drugs section, alcohol and energy drinks section, side effects on physical health section, and social and mental health section.

The sample and procedure

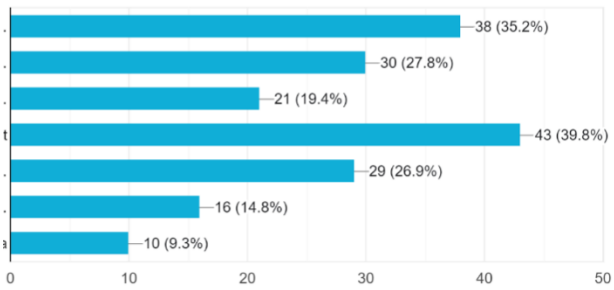
In total, 110 people decided to take part in the survey. From the total number of people who responded, 50% were male and 50% were female. Regarding the participants ages, it was between 18- above 24 years old. From the total number 26.6% were between 18 and 21 years old, 30% were between 21 and 24 years old, and 46.4% were 24 and above. Participation in this study was purely voluntary. Nobody knew who took the poll.

RESULTS

As mentioned above, the purpose of the research is to answer the questions presented, so below we present the obtained results. Regarding the question about whether drug use and abuse are problems in North Macedonia, 98 respondents, or 89.8%, answered **yes,** and 11 respondents, or 10.1%, answered no (Graph.1). And, when asked why they feel that substance use disorder is a problem in North Macedonia, 38.9% answered that they have heard about it from others; 35.2% answered that they have had a personal experience; and 27.8% answered that they have witnessed the experience of a friend or family member as shown in graph 2 (Graph. 2).

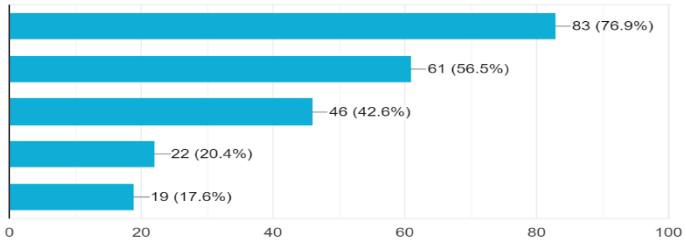


Graph. 1. The drug use and abuse



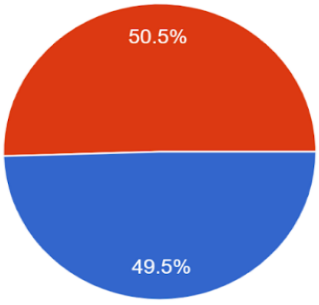
Graph. 2. The reasons why drug use and abuse is problem

In response to the question of what types of drugs are being abused, 76.9% answered marijuana, 56.5% cocaine, 42.6% prescription medication, and 17.6% other as its shown in following graph (Graph. 3).

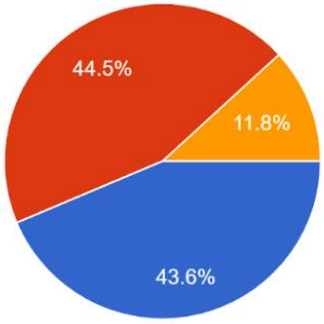


Graph. 3. Types of drugs

Is the use of non-prescribed medications equivalent to the use of illicit narcotics? 49.5% answered **yes,** and 50.5% said **no**. Prescription drugs are misused and abused substances. 42.2% of respondents answered that they had taken a prescribed drug even though it was not prescribed to them, and 43.6% responded that they had used a prescribed medication on a more frequent basis than the doctor had instructed them to do so. On the following graphs we present the results from our sample (Graph. 4& 5).

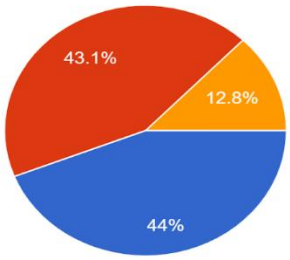


Graph. 4. The use of non-prescribed medications

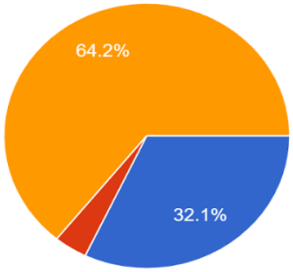


Graph. 5. Misusing of the prescription drugs

In order to see if they are aware of the side effects of substance use disorders on social life which was our aim of this study we asked our respondents about which aspects of their life have been more influenced. Respondents were asked about the side effects of these drugs on their physical, mental, and social lives.When asked if they experienced any negative consequences as a result of taking a prescription drug, 44% answered yes and 41% answered no. Beside the awareness about the side effects on their lives, our results showed that youths that use and abuse drugs (prescribed and non-prescribed) 32% of them feels guilty and just 3.7% of them do not feel guilty on taking them, while the majority 64.2% stated that they do not misuse (Graph. 6&7).

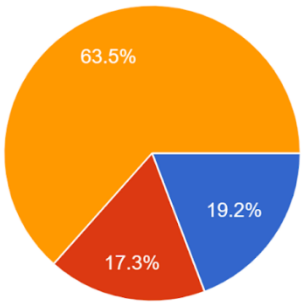


Graph. 6. Awareness for side effects



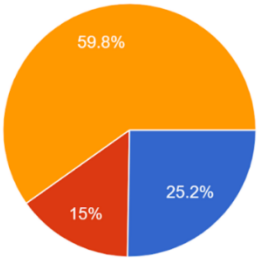
Graph. 7. Feel of guilty on the usage and misuse

In our question about the impact in their family 22.4% of all respondents answered that they find themselves neglecting their family because of substance use disorder, as it is shown on the following graph (Graph. 8).

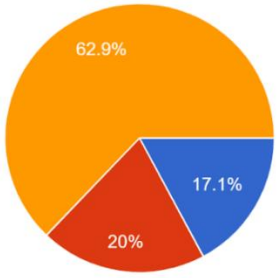


Graph. 8. Neglecting the family

We obtained the following results for the following questions. Regarding the question, "Has your use ended relationships with friends?" 25,2% responded yes, while 17.1% of all respondents admitted that they have gotten into confrontations or fights with others. The following graphs presents the results from our sample (Graph. 9&10).

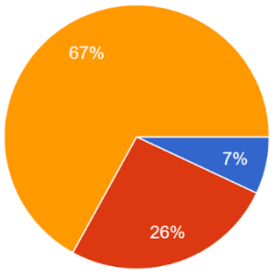


Graph. 9. Impact on social and friendship relations

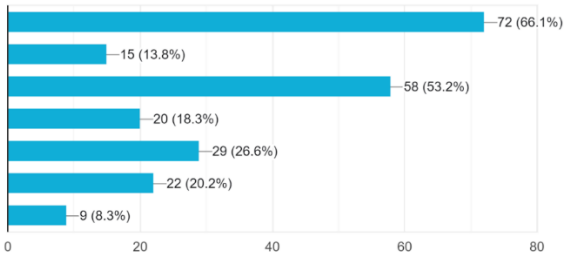


Graph. 10. Confrontations and fights with others

As stated above, our aim was to see if they know about the treatments and special supportive programs for them. According to our results, we may say that only few of them were willing to ask for help and treatment and the majority does not know where and from whom they should ask for help. When asked if they thought help for their problems with substance use disorder, only 7% answered that they asked for help, while 26% stated that they did not ask for help. The following graph shows the distrubition of our sample (Graph. 11).
As results indicate (graph. 12), for 66.1% of participants the first person they may ask for help is the doctor, 53.2% of the total number see the counsellor as person whom they ask for help. Parents for 26.6% of them and internet for 20.2% are the following. For 18.3% of them friends may be the ones that they ask for helping, 13. 8% teachers, and the rest for 8.3%.



Graph. 11. Asking for help



Graph. 12. Peoples to whom they address for help

DISCUSSION

The study has provided an important opportunity to advance the understanding of substance use disorder and its physical, mental, social side effects among young people in North Macedonia, particularly in Skopje. The other important aspect is to emphasize the importance of awareness for side effects and the resources we have to help the youth in dealing with substance abuse.

Is cannabis the most popular illegal substance among young people in North Macedonia ?

When asked about the different kinds of drugs that are being abused, 76.9% of respondents answered marijuana. Most modern civilizations nowadays start using cannabis in their teens. Most young individuals use cannabis in order to get "high," a moderate pleasure, and relaxation. Our survey data shows that gatherings are the most common setting for cannabis use, followed by homes and schools.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Describe the potentially devastating repercussions that drug use may have on the body. Marijuana users are more likely to develop short-term psychosis (not knowing what is real, hallucinations, and paranoia) and long-term mental disorders, such as schizophrenia (a form of mental illness in which patients may see or hear things that are not real). People who start using marijuana at a younger age and use it more frequently are more likely to develop schizophrenia. Additionally, marijuana use has been linked to melancholy, social anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide. (CDC, 2021) According to the results of the survey, herbal cannabis is used for its sedative and euphoric effects, particularly to alleviate stress or relax, get high or for pleasure, and facilitate better sleep. Over three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they had used drugs most frequently at home in the previous year. ("European Web Survey on Drugs 2021: Top Level Findings in the Western Balkans | Www.emcdda.europa.eu," 2021)

The most recent data on drug use among students came from the international ESPAD report 2019 and reported that drug use prevalence among sixteen-year-old students in the Republic of North Macedonia was around half and lower than the European average in the case of all drugs used, and that is the most notable fact. All the data from ESPAD studies in North Macedonia indicates that the level of lifetime cannabis use among 15- to 16-year-old students was not significantly different, but there was a slight increase over the years. (*Results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, ESPAD Group*, n.d.).

Are our youth taking benzodiazepines without a doctor's prescription?

Substances taken with a doctor's prescription are prone to abuse and misuse. 42% of respondents said that they have used a prescribed medication despite the fact that they did not have a doctor's prescriptionfor it. There are some respondents (43.6%) who admitted that they often take prescribed medication in excess of the amount that was recommended for them. Additionally, a few of the respondents (33%) said that they sometimes combine the use of the prescribed medications with alcohol. 40 percent of respondents said that in the last 12 months, a sedative (mostly diazepam) was prescribed to them by a health care provider to help with sleep,calm down, and relax.

Interactions between benzodiazepines and other substances, such as opioid pain medicines or alcohol, are possible. These kinds of interactions can intensify the effects of drugs and/or alcohol, which can lead to severe or even fatal consequences. (Cleveland Clinic, 2023).

Side effects of substance use disorders on social life

25.2% of respondents said their substance use disorder had ended relationships with friends, 22.4% neglected their family, 17.1% had gotten into confrontations or fights, and only 8% experienced withdrawal symptoms when they stopped taking the drug. This suggests that substance use disorder can lead to neglecting relationships, neglecting family, and confrontations or fights.

Our results give us the same direction as many other studies about the side effects of drug use, here we are talking mainly about the psychosocial aspect and social relations. Those, according to Petterson at el, (2019), states that individuals with a substance use disorder (SUD), often have fewer social support network resources than those without SUDs. In their research they confirmed that the relationship that most participants described as helpful for initiating abstinence was recognition by a peer or a caring relationship with a service provider or sibling and argued that in order to be able to reach and maintain abstinence, it is important to maintain positive relationships and to engage self-agency to protect oneself from the influences of negative relationships. They also suggested that substance use disorder service providers should increase the extent to which they involve the social networks of clients when designing new treatment approaches.

Counselling approaches and programs

Among variety and specific programs that are available for drug and substance abuse, the new tendencies lead us in many programs designed and specialized for each type of addiction. In the literature many researches suggest that as most successful programs and models as Suppes & Wells (2012), emphasizes are Self – help groups programs including here AA (Alcoholic Anonimous) and NA (Narcotic Anonimous), where peoples share same problem and seeking for mutual assistance, and Harm Reduction Model including groups and individual treatments with aim for reducing substance use and for reducing the danger of harming themselves and others during substance mis/use, which takes time for the clients to change.

Bearing in mind that here we are talking for youth population adolescents, The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA, 2000), gives as detailed programs and approaches to drug abuse counselling. Those, Jorgensen & Salwen (2000), on their reports for the NIDA, among other programs and approaches, they talk about the Center for Child and Adolescent Treatment Services (CCATS), Model, described as a day treatment model for adolescent drug abusers with a comorbid psychiatric disorder, with emphasis on those aspects of the individual counselor's relationship with the adolescent client specific to this program.

They describe clinical techniques as they relate to the common treatment goals of motivating adolescent clients toward abstinence from alcohol and other drugs (AOD) and other self-destructive behaviors, preventing relapse, assisting adolescent clients in learning to recognize and tolerate strong affective states, and developing alternate coping mechanisms to drug abuse as a means of regulating these affective states. They also emphasize, the importance of a sophisticated integration of psychodynamic clinical techniques with traditional chemical addiction or 12-step recovery model techniques as central to an effective working individual alliance with dually diagnosed adolescent clients within both group and individual treatments (61:2000).

This program includes group and individual session treatment where the role of the counsellor is crucial. As they state for the adolescent client to release his or her dependence on the powerful, self-medicating aspects of chemical abuse, the counselor must impart both directly and indirectly the message that human relationships can be hopeful, loving, and supportive. They assume that through exploration of the inevitable disappointments within the individual therapeutic relationship, the adolescent client can learn that the intense affect that may be experienced at these times, transferentially evoking injuries sustained in the context of primary relationships

with significant others, can be managed within a world view of ultimate faith in the value of each individual's capacity to give and receive caring and love (70:2000).

As Dimitrijoska et al (2016) report, currently in North Macedonia mainly programs are based on Harm Reduction programs. According to them there are two main approaches:

1. **Health Care**- includes services provided from health public and private institutions meanly focusing in daily hospital treatment, hospital treatment, detoxification and substances treatment. The majority of drug users are treated through day hospital treatment, where they are treated with substances, psychosocial interventions, individual or group counseling and psycho-social therapy (115: 2016)
2. **Social Services**- includes multidisciplinary approach provided through a system of measures, activities and policies for prevention and for overcoming the basic social risks to which drug users are exposed to such as reducing poverty and social exclusion as well as strengthening of their capacities for social integration.The aim of these services is to provide appropriate services, information, counseling and education for work engagement and engagement in cultural, entertainment and recreational activities. The beneficiaries require immediate assistance in the process of their social reintegration after completing the program of medical treatment. The direct treatment is applied when the problems of the user are of psychological and somatic nature as well as when problems are overcomed. The social worker is in a role of therapist working on the personality issues, attitudes, value system, emotions and behavior as well as on stimulation, activation and development of current potentials of the person with the aim of improvement and social integration in the environment. Besides counseling that is used in the direct treatment they are implementing psychotherapeutic method, group therapy, psychodrama, reality therapy, cognitive therapy, and other methods and techniques (116;117: 2017).

Limitations and suggestion

Although, drug usage among youths as global phenomena is high, we can't generalize the results and since the survey was adopted on the language of the participants (Albanian), there may be language releases, but again we assume that our findings will help as for further widely researches in this field. Our results showed that our youth is not well educated and psycho-educated for the side effects and easy access to drugs without medical prescriptions makes this an even more serious problem. A multidisciplinary approach is necessary and more serious treatment and collective awareness about the consequences of drug substance including individual and group medical and psychotherapeutic treatment.

CONCLUSION

According to the findings of the research, young people in our country are abusing and misusing these drugs without being aware of the terrible adverse effects that come along with them. It is essential to improve the education of our young people, and it is essential for those who are already impacted by the effects of drug use disorder to seek assistance in order to complete their rehabilitation. More money has to be dedicated to the collection of excise fees on alcoholic beverages and cannabis cultivation. Clinicians should be mindful to whom they prescribe medications to. Another important part is also the level of awareness about the side effects and specific counselling programs which should be included in the general treatment and rehabilitation. Having in consideration the programs and approaches we mentioned above, it is necessary for those to be fully implemented during the treatment and to include more multidisciplinary approaches. Since our results showed that counselors and counseling psychological treatment is the second option for help, this leaves us room for more research in this field with the aim of designing and adapting adequate counselling programs that practice has shown to be successful in the countries where they have been applied.

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