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Substance Abusers Have Trouble ID'ing Emotions from Faces

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Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on February 4, 2011

New research suggests individuals who abuse drugs have difficulty identifying emotions from facial expression.

Spanish scientists from the University of Granada analyzed the relation between drug abuse and recognition of basic emotions (happiness, surprise, wrath, fear, sadness and disgust) by drug abusers. They found the abusers had trouble identifying wrath, disgust, fear and sadness by facial expression.

Further, regular abuse of alcohol, cannabis and cocaine usually affects abusers' cognitive fluency (how easy it is to think about something) and decision-making. Consuming cannabis and cocaine negatively affects working memory and reasoning. Similarly, cocaine abuse influences inhibition.

For the purpose of this study, researchers carried out a neuropsychological evaluation (with neurocognitive evaluation and emotional processing tests) of a total of 123 polysubstance abusers and 67 no-drug users with similar social and demographic backgrounds (age and schooling).

The target population were individuals who consumed drugs such as cocaine, cannabis, heroin, alcohol, MDMA (ecstasy) and methamphetamine, and who were enrolled in two rehabilitation projects in the province of Granada.

The study revealed that 70 percent of drug abusers presented some type of neuropsychological deterioration, regardless of the type of substance consumed. Deterioration was most pronounced in working memory, but fluency, flexibility, planning, multitasking ability and interference were also affected.

Dr. J.M. Fernández Serrano, a psychologist and principal investigator, thinks that the results obtained "should be employed to develop political and social policies aimed at promoting adequate rehab programs adapted to the neuropsychological profile of drug-abusers."

The research conducted at the University of Granada has been the first to study the prevalence of psychological deterioration in drug abusers enrolled in therapeutic communities.

Source: [University of Granada](#)

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