

Addiction and Contemporary Culture

Are we the products of our heredity, or of our culture, or both, and how do both play a role in shaping our personalities, our beliefs, and our habits? or other drugs?

Some parts of contemporary culture that might affect people's behavior with alcohol and other drugs include:

1. Views about what is considered normal or acceptable drinking and drug use
2. Mainstream beliefs about what is right and wrong
3. Common attitudes about what things are most important in life
4. Widely held spiritual and religious beliefs
5. Role modeling in popular entertainment
6. Marketing of alcohol and tobacco products
7. Attitudes about what it means to be a man or a woman
8. Traditions about how to celebrate happy or important occasions and how to cope with pain, stress, and hardships

Popular Entertainment

Consider role modeling in popular entertainment as an example and ask yourself to describe what behaviors and attitudes related to use of alcohol and other drugs are shown as good or acceptable in movies, TV shows, popular music, and other forms of entertainment.

Point out that these forms of entertainment often encourage use of substances in the following ways:

- Many movies and TV programs show appealing and good-looking people drinking, smoking, or using other drugs, often showing substance use as a sign that a character is tough (if a man) or sophisticated (either sex.)
- Drinking and drug use are sometimes glamorized as part of a rebellious, outlaw, or gangster lifestyle.
- Being drunk or high is shown as a funny situation.
- The negative parts of an alcoholic or addicted life are ignored or downplayed; we are seldom shown people having to deal with hangovers (except in comical ways), serious injuries from accidents or fights, other health problems, legal trouble, the financial fallout, and so on.

Marketing of Alcohol and Tobacco

Most of us are exposed to advertising and other forms of marketing of these substances every day, and this also affects our attitudes and behavior. (If it didn't affect people's behavior and increase use of their products, these advertisers wouldn't spend billions of dollars every year on advertising.)

Commercials often show other people being attracted to substance-using behavior, as in commercials in which beautiful women are fascinated by the man who is drinking the brand of beer or liquor being advertised.

Marketing of alcohol and tobacco products is often aimed at a very young audience—young characters are shown in ads, activities are those that appeal to the young, the ads are placed where they target a young audience, and themes are youth-oriented (Joe Camel, etc.)

Advertisers use humor to sell products, including alcohol and tobacco companies, with an example being the beer commercials during the Super Bowl every year.

The physical placement of both advertisements and the products in stores is aimed at increasing our use of alcohol and tobacco. They're often placed in the "impulse buy" area in stores where customers are standing in line to check out, and the sheer number of ads is amazing.

Family and Cultural Traditions

Alcoholism and addiction in parents and other role models increases the risk of the same problems repeating themselves in the lives of those raised in alcoholic or addicted homes. Examples:

- People who grow up in families with a lot of substance abuse often miss out on learning many life skills such as good communication, problem solving, healthy ways to handle anger, financial management, and so on. Lack of these skills raises day-to-day stress levels and the likelihood of self-medicating.
- In many families and cultures it is traditional to use alcohol or other drugs to celebrate special occasions, and to use alcohol in particular as a rite of passage to adulthood.
- Likewise, many people inherit the custom of using alcohol or other drugs to cope with emotionally painful situations.
- Some families have a pattern of multigenerational involvement in gangs that engage in drug-related crime.

Addictive Lifestyle Attitudes Promoted by Contemporary Culture

Our society also promotes other attitudes that are part of an addictive lifestyle and way of thinking, even if they aren't focused directly on use of alcohol or other drugs. Examples:

- *Instant gratification:* Our culture encourages the idea that we should be able to have what we want when we want it, whether by using a credit card to buy a fast food meal or by taking a pill to get into a happy mood.
- *Feeling good:* Our society doesn't do a good job of teaching us how to face pain, accept it, and deal with it. Instead we focus on feeling good. Nothing is wrong with wanting to feel good, but if we believe we *need* to feel good, so much so that we'll choose feeling good now at the price of feeling worse later, we have a problem.
- *Self-centeredness:* In many ways, mainstream society teaches people to be self-centered and inconsiderate of others, from the behavior of corporate executives to the actions of the "heroes" of many movies, TV shows, and music videos.
- *Impulsivity:* Compare the "Just do it" motto that a lot of advertising encourages to the "think the drink or drug through" approach we often hear in recovery programs, and judge whether mainstream society promotes an addictive or sober way of making decisions.
- *Low self-esteem and shame:* Much advertising aims to convince us that something is wrong with us but we can fix it by buying whatever the advertiser is selling, from deodorant to clothes. Compare this with the feeling that many alcoholics and addicts have that something is wrong with them, and the temporary relief they get from that feeling when they take a drink or drug.
- *Emotional isolation:* Alcoholics and addicts are unable to maintain close and healthy relationships with other people, because of the dishonesty, sneakiness, selfishness, and manipulation that are part of the disease of addiction. Our society also encourages us to put up fronts and try to impress and manipulate others rather than being honest and open.
- Ask the group for more examples.

CONCLUSION

Review the following key points:

1. Contemporary society has a strong influence on the way we think about many things including our use of alcohol and other drugs, and in many ways substance abuse is considered normal and acceptable behavior in our society.
2. Popular entertainment promotes the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in several ways.
3. Marketing of alcohol and tobacco products is widespread and effective.
4. Society also teaches other attitudes that are part of an addictive lifestyle and way of thinking, even when they don't directly involve using alcohol or other drugs.