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Helping clinicians connect: Understanding addiction from the perspective of a drug abuser

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What causes an abuser to relapse to drug use, especially when the consequences can result in incarceration? Positive and negative expectancies have been used to explain the motivation for drug use. Positive expectancies generate anticipation of the pleasurable effects of drug-taking, which increases the behaviour of drug-taking, whereas negative expectancies reflect motivations to reduce drug use. Depending on the individual, the variation of the strength of their expectancies would account for the individual differences of drug use patterns across contexts. These expectancies develop steadily and weigh more positively as drug use is maintained. The effect of a drug abuser is also a key in understanding drug use behaviour. Drug craving can be triggered by negative emotional states, events, cues of withdrawal episodes and information that the drug is not available. When the negative affect system is activated, this induces physiological reactions that are likened to withdrawal, and in turn also increases the desire to alleviate and relief negative affect through substance use. On the other hand, positive emotional states can activate the system, which induces increased effectiveness of drug-related cues, thoughts and actions. Therefore, drug craving and avoidance of withdrawal may act simultaneously in individuals. Drug users may take drugs for either the positive reinforcing effects or to avoid negative affect or for both reasons. Detailed interviews with drug users were conducted in order to determine the specific drug cognitions that initiated and maintained drug use in Singapore despite the strict legal restrictions on drug behaviour. The specific motives behind the processes of drug addiction are complex and vast, with several different perspectives to be considered. This includes individual (e.g. cognitive) and social factors. This qualitative study therefore aimed to understand the cognitions and motivations across the process of drug consumption (initiation of drug use, maintenance of drug use and the progress to addiction) for Asian drug offenders. Understanding the cognitions and motivations of drug offenders in Singapore is essential for future development of effective treatment programs, interventions and prevention strategies. This perspective will inform clinicians on the areas of focus for intervention and follow-through.

Biography

Jasmin Kaur is a senior psychologist with Singapore Prison Service, Singapore. She conducts research on offending patterns, forensic risk assessment tools, and understanding offending behaviour. Prior to her research portfolio, she was a practicing clinician who provided group interventions for violent offenders. She completed her Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours) from National University of Singapore and holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from James Cook University, Australia. She is also currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the National University of Singapore.

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