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# Young abusers

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**M**ASS Communication student Katherine does not think that she is a drug addict. Even though she has smoked marijuana for eight years, the bubbly college student believes she is not dependent on drugs. It has been two months since Katherine last smoked a joint, and she is confident she can hold off till the next semester break in July.

"The last time I smoked weed was in February, right before college started. I'm just waiting till the semester is over before I roll the next blunt," says Katherine, 25, who studies in a private college in Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

Katherine certainly does not fit the stereotypical profile of the troubled and neglected youngster who turns to drugs as a form of escapism. She seems like an all-rounder; a good student who is also popular. Her parents are doctors who adore her, and they go to church every Sunday.

She started doing marijuana at 17, almost as soon as she entered college and saw her friends doing it.

"The first high was really fun. I felt as if I didn't have any worry in the world," says Katherine, who started cutting classes just to 'smoke up' with her buddies by the second semester. There were usually about seven of them in the group, and they would share a joint or two among them.

It was not hard to get drugs. At first, she got them from her friends, but she now buys them directly from a dealer.

Her father suspected something was amiss when he noticed that Katherine was frequently lethargic and had red, sunken eyes. He confronted her, but she denied using drugs and

even agreed to go for a urine test. Somehow, that pacified her father; he did not make her go for the drug test in the end.

However, he took Katherine out of college because he did not like the changes he saw in her.

Being "almost" busted by her father, however, only prompted Katherine to be more careful with her drug use. She stayed home for six months before enrolling in another private college, but she does not see the need to give up drugs completely.

"If I can manage my urges and only use drugs at specified periods of the year, I believe that the habit will never spiral out of control," she says.

Katherine's biggest fear is the police catching her with drugs, especially when she is driving back after getting her supply from her regular dealer.

She keeps stressing that she is only a recreational user, and will not end up being a hardcore drug user.

Well, that's exactly what college student Jackson thought before he nearly lost his life to drugs. A straight-laced and goody-two-shoes guy, Jackson was the last person anybody would suspect of abusing drugs.

Then, he fell into depression. He was introduced to the easiest anti-depressant available - marijuana - and got hooked on it quickly.

From marijuana, Jackson soon "graduated" to using cocaine, which he snorted.

"For almost a year, I got high on a daily basis - in between classes, after college, at home. Sometimes, I didn't go to classes for days," says Jackson, 23.

He spent almost RM1,000 a month on drugs. Jackson's parents had no clue (and still don't) of their only son's substance abuse.



His brush with death came when his housemates found him lying face down in the kitchen, with blood coming out of his nose and ears one night.

"They took me to the nearest clinic. One look at me, and the doctor knew that I had an overdose. She told them to take me to the hospital but my friends didn't because they didn't want to get me in trouble with the authorities," says Jackson.

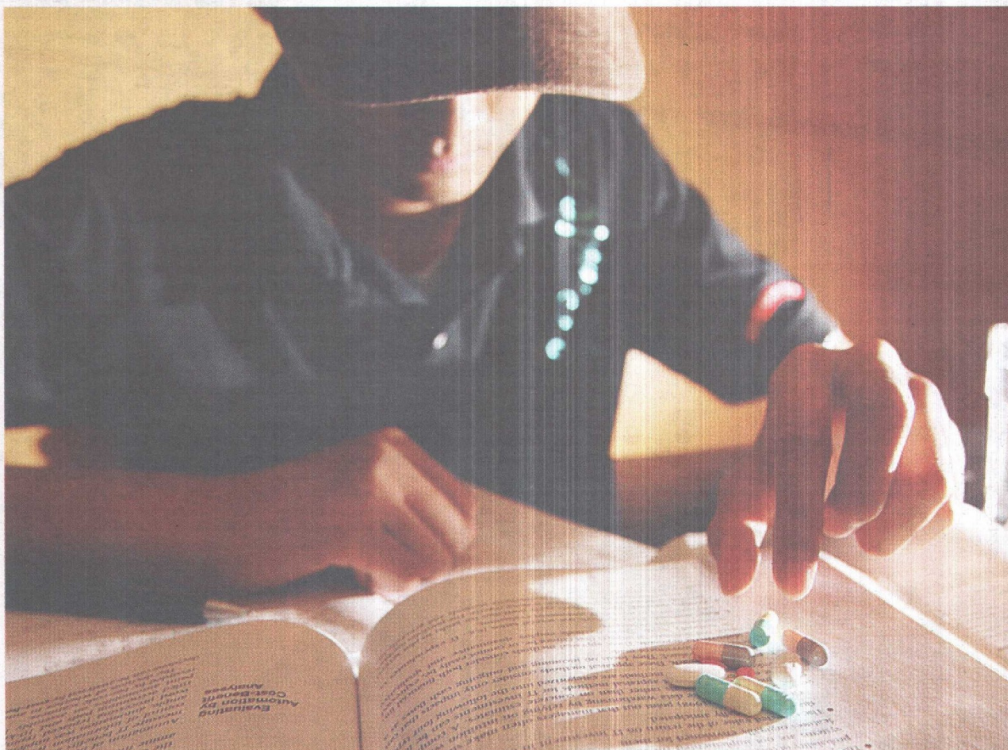
Jackson's housemates nursed him to health, with the help of "what-to-do-when-someone-overdoses" articles they got online.

"My friends threatened to report me to the worst authorities ever - my parents - if I didn't clean up my act. I would rather go to jail than face my parents' disappointment so I sought help fast," says Jackson.

To kick his drug habit, Jackson enrolled in a drug substitution programme in a private clinic. Under the doctor's supervision, Jackson took Subutex, an opiate that helped him manage his craving and withdrawal symptoms, but do not provide a high.

After four months of treatment, Jackson felt that he has overcome his drug addiction. However, he still indulges in marijuana occasionally.

In 2007, the Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation found that 71% of new drug addicts are between the ages of 19 and 39. Most teenagers try out drugs for the first time



**Nightly dosage:** Some students take drugs to keep them awake all night to study during exam season.

between 13 and 15.

Although the number of registered drug addict is 300,000, the real figure may actually be around 1.2 million.

According to Persatuan Pengasih Malaysia training manager Hafizi Harun, most users try drugs for the first time simply out of curiosity and peer pressure, and sometimes due to their lifestyles.

He also says that drugs like heroin and marijuana are slowly becoming less popular among the younger generation today.

"Heroin and marijuana are 'downers' – the type of drugs that gives calming effects but kids don't prefer that anymore," he says.

The most popular type of drugs now among youngsters are Ecstasy, methadone, crystal methamphetamine – drugs under the "uppers" category, that cause users to be hyperactive and aggressive for long periods of time.

"The users want to move fast and stay awake and need the substance to keep up. Some students even take these because they want to study, and some, just so that they can party six to seven hours straight," he says.

Ahmad Nor Ezani was sent to Pengasih last year after he became addicted to heroin. Like most first time drug users, he too started with marijuana.

"When Ezani first came to us, he wasn't a hardcore drug user but was definitely on his way to becoming one," says Hafizi.

Universiti Sains Malaysia Department of Psychiatry senior lecturer and psychiatrist Dr Muhammad Najib Mohamad Alwi says that some adolescents underestimate the dangers of recreational drugs.

"After all, many of their peers do not face immediate complications," he says, adding that there are also teenagers who do drugs just for the sake of rebelling against the rules.

He says that some drugs may cause addiction more easily than others.

"Often, youngsters try out



**Cheap drug:** Cannabis is the most popular drug among youths because it is the cheapest one available.

drug for the first time to feel pleasure or to relieve depression or stress," says Dr Muhammad.

Unfortunately, most drug users underestimate their drug intake and frequency of intake, which contribute towards their inability to recognise their addiction.

"People only realise that they have addiction problems after they have become a hardcore drug addict and are dependent on it," says Universiti Putra Malaysia

Department of Psychiatry lecturer and clinical psychologist Dr Zubaidah Jamil Osman.

Dr Muhammad also reminds that repeated drug use disrupts the human brain's well-balanced system in ways that persist, eventually replacing a person's normal needs and desires with a one-track mission to seek and use drugs.

At this point, he says, all normal desires and motives will be replaced with the desire to take drugs.

"Unfortunately, teenagers often don't see the link between their actions today and the consequences tomorrow.

"They also have a tendency to feel indestructible and immune to the problems that others experience due to drugs," says Dr Muhammad.



**Not too discreet:** Katherine used to smoke marijuana with her friends at the stairwell in her college. – Pictures posed by models.

## Drug users in Malaysia

- 91% of new addicts are employed
- Hardcore addicts spend at least RM100 to sustain their addiction while average-level addicts spend more than RM30 a day.
- Drug addicts in Malaysia spend at least RM1bil on drugs annually.
- Heroin and amphetamine stimulants are the most popular drugs.
- State most hit by the drug menace is Penang, followed by Johor, Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Kelantan, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Malacca, Sarawak, Sabah and Labuan.

Source: Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation

## Where to seek help?

**Persatuan Pengasih Malaysia**  
No. 1547

Jln Syers Bukit Tunku  
50480 Kuala Lumpur  
Tel: 03-6201 3179  
Fax: 03-6201 5940  
Email: info@pengasih.net  
Website: www.pengasih.net/

**Malaysian CARE (MCARE)**  
15, Jalan 3/146, Metro Centre  
Bandar Tasik Selatan  
57000 Kuala Lumpur  
Tel: 03-9058 2102  
Fax: 03-9058-4057  
Email: mail@malaysiancare.org  
Website: www.malaysiancare.org

**PEMADAM Kebangsaan**  
8, Jalan Ledang  
50480 Kuala Lumpur  
Tel: 03-2094 1190  
Fax: 03-2094 3233  
Email: pemadam@tm.net.my  
Website: www.pemadam.org.my

# Signs to look out for

UNIVERSITI Sains Malaysia Department of Psychiatry senior lecturer and psychiatrist Dr Muhammad Najib Mohamad Alwi says that there is no sure way of telling if someone is doing drugs by just looking at them.

He says that the effect of the drug could have worn off before the parent sees the child, or the drug's effect may not be easy to observe.

"But at the same time, even if there is a major change in their behaviour, it could be caused by something else such as illness or depression," he says.

Nevertheless, Dr Muhammad says that parents should look out for these signs, which may indicate their children have problems including substance abuse.

- Silence, sulking, or anger towards others
- Mood swings
- More than the usual lack of cooperation and rudeness
- Wanting to spend very little time being with or talking with the family
- Poor school performance, or truancy
- Dropping out of regular activities, like sport

- A change of friends – unexplained or sudden change to a new group of friends
- Changes in physical appearance, e.g.: red eyes
- Eating problems
- Lack of energy – feeling tired all the time
- Valuable items or money missing at home.