



A Realistic Look at Drug Substitution

“Keeping it real” Alert: Before reading any further on this topic let’s start by identifying that when it comes to addiction, the *ideal* path toward progress and positive change is *abstinence*. Millions of people who suffered with a substance use issue have successfully followed the path toward complete abstinence as their path to change and recovery. However, there are and always will be exceptions to the rule. There are people out there in the recovery community who strongly swear against any effort to attempt to casually use more socially acceptable substance like alcohol and marijuana. However, there are others who insist that drug substitution can be successfully accomplished in their personal case; (An example would be someone who overcame opioid dependence who was able to return to social use of alcohol without consequences or opioid relapse). Many who try to substitute their drug use will try and fail and learn by experience that substitution is not possible in their situation. Others will say that switching from a highly dangerous substance like heroin to a less harmful substance was what got them through the hard times along their journey toward success. Both of these perspectives exist and neither should be ignored, right or wrong.

The point being made here is not to say “ If you are using opiates, just switch to marijuana or alcohol and you’ll be fine” That would be misleading because many people who try substituting will learn that they are not fine, as the outcome may not be positive with this potentially precarious substitution experiment. Rather, the point being addressed here is that no matter what is suggested or recommended by both friends and professionals, *some individuals will still choose to substitute*. Not everyone who makes an effort to address their substance use issue will choose abstinence regardless of how strongly others in the recovery community may suggest it. Particularly when it comes to relapse, there are definite risks involved with drug substitution however, there will always be individuals still willing to take those risks regardless of warnings from others. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that drug substitution is not recommended as the ideal path, we cannot ignore the fact that drug substitution is a direction that some choose for themselves in the real world of addiction, recovery and lifestyle change.

So, in the modern world some may need to accept the fact that some individuals are going to choose “marijuana maintenance therapy” or attempt controlled use of alcohol in spite of a history of addiction. Therefore, considering this subject from a harm reduction perspective, what are some practical tips we can suggest for those who have chosen this path?

1. **Educate yourself on what you are getting into** – Don’t just listen to others on one side of the equation who are for substitution and who tell you things like simply switching to marijuana use is “the answer” everyone is looking for – Instead do legitimate research. Listen also to people who have tried and failed at substitution and think about those experiences and how things turned out, particularly over the long term. Make an informed and educated and well-rounded choice before making a decision for yourself.
2. **Be open minded and honest with yourself throughout the entire process**– Even if you believe with all of your heart that you can successfully substitute your substances and remain in control, *it is important to consider the possibility that you may be wrong*. Many strong-willed people with the best intentions have attempted to substitute one drug for another yet did not succeed in spite of their best intentions. Just because a friend of yours told you that he or she successfully switched from crack and heroin to weed, for example, doesn’t mean that the same will automatically will be a success for you. Often there may be circumstances beyond your control (like genetic factors) that may make substitution a failed venture for you, no matter how hard you may try to make it work. Maybe you can succeed, but for your own good, consider the possibility that maybe it will not work as very few things are guaranteed in this life. Always strongly consider the risks and dangers associated with relapse, particularly life threatening issues like overdose.



3. **Develop an “Evacuation Plan” ahead of time** – Plan ahead when to cut the cord and bail out on your attempts at substitution. Have a backup plan in case you are wrong and substituting is not working. Be ready to recognize the signs that will tell you that substitution is failing and have supportive others prepared to tell you when these signs are present (For example – Continued consequences, financial problems, legal issues, family concerns, and any signs that may indicate that you are not living up to your full potential, and most importantly think about changing your plan if you find yourself relapsing back to your primary drug)