



Well-being, mental health and drugs: Closer than ever?

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The concept of well-being began to be investigated by psychological science more closely from the 1980s onwards, becoming popular only recently. Sometimes trivialized, its use has been on the agenda of entertainment programs, it floods social networks with various posts and it fills coaches' statements in the most different contexts, whether school, academic, family or work.

With the pandemic, well-being was eagerly sought due to social isolation and to the anxiety or depression responses triggered by the health crisis. In addition, its importance in common sense seems to have been definitely established. Based on their available resources, each person sought different strategies to maintain or increase their well-being levels. Even so, the pandemic years exerted impacts on psychological states and generated the most diverse emotional reactions. Effects like these are directly reflected in the way we feel: good or bad. And this assessment has impacts on mental health.

But what are we talking about anyway?

From the Positive Psychology (a new area of scientific studies in Psychology) perspective, subjective well-being is defined as the perception and evaluation that an individual makes of their own life, in terms of affective and cognitive states. A person experiences subjective well-being when they feel pleasant emotions and few unpleasant emotions, when they engage in activities, when they live pleurably and when they are satisfied with life⁽¹⁾. Therefore, the construct is defined by high levels of positive emotions and moods, low levels of negative emotions and moods, and high satisfaction with life.

On the other hand, satisfaction with life concerns what leads a person to evaluate their life positively, through the subjective determination of what a happy life is. Satisfaction with life is the cognitive component that complements happiness and has been considered as the main indicator of well-being⁽²⁾.

We can increase our psychological well-being by making use of different punctual attitudes related to sociability and to maintaining positive and adapted human interactions, in contact with nature or in the search for spirituality, among

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other strategies. However, in the search for this well-being state, many people can resort to psychoactive substances, historically available in different societies and under the most varied presentations. In general, their consumption is a multifactorial phenomenon related to social and contextual aspects. Among the licit and easily accessible substances, in addition to alcohol and tobacco, marketed with age regulation, there are also a series of popular products containing caffeine (such as coffee, tea, energy drinks, *mate* and *guaraná*). More recently, and initially unregulated, electronic cigarettes or vaporizers have also become common, even used by children and adolescents⁽³⁾.

Use of these products can be associated with expectations of psychotropic effects through changes in functions, in the search for different mood states or for psychological capabilities or abilities. Despite presenting psychoactive characteristics, they are allowed, apparently safe and regulated and, for many consumers, they may seem to provide positive sensations, whether related to relaxation, happiness or sociability. Simply think of what the classic image of a happy celebration might be, with people smiling and holding a glass of some alcoholic beverage in the foreground. In addition, the expectation of a stimulating effect of alcohol can also be added to the expectation of an invigorating effect of energy drinks, in a synergy between both assets, by mixing the former with the latter⁽⁴⁾ in what is commonly known as a "kit" or "combo".

However, although they seem illusory to meet the current demand for well-being or readiness for life, some of these substances, even if legal, can exert an impact on global health, either in physical or mental terms. Some products with psychoactive effects may even develop their advertising aimed at the current demand for "functional" products, which promote health, disposition, energy or well-being. Here it is important to resume the concept of subjective well-being for Positive Psychology as the state promoted through factors such as positive emotions, satisfactory relationships with other people, engagement, sense of purpose and perception of fulfillment⁽⁵⁾.

It is very important to highlight that the presence of high well-being levels does not guarantee mental health. The studies clearly indicate that patients with a definite mental disease condition can have high well-being levels⁽⁶⁾. The premise remains that well-being, mental health and use of psychoactive drugs are very closely related.


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