

The Fault in Our Drug Awareness Campaigns

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In the last few years, I have had the opportunity to attend some seminars intended to raise awareness against drug abuse. In all of these seminars, the target audience were mainly teenagers and young adults. While these campaigns are necessary to show how harmful drugs can be, I could not help but be disappointed in some of the panelists.

Firstly, these seminars tend to focus on the preaching more than the education. I have noticed some speakers reiterate the claim that all drugs are equally bad, but this is a misconception. Yes, drugs are bad and you shouldn't do them, but drugs encompass several categories and have different effects on the user. For example, depressants slow down brain activity, stimulants can lead to paranoia and so on. Speaking of effects, some drugs cause significant damage over prolonged abuse while others do so in a shorter period of time. Hence, the claim that all drugs are equally dangerous is nothing but a myth. Unfortunately, none of the seminars I have attended elaborated on the types of drugs and their effects.

In one seminar in particular, an attendee asked the host a well-informed question



ILLUSTRATION: EHSAN MOSTAFA INAN

about the medicinal benefits of cannabis. While research has shown that limited and prescribed doses of cannabis can be used to treat a range of ailments, the host (who claimed to be some sort of a specialist) refuted these claims without further explanation. Acknowledging the medicinal benefits of the supervised use of certain drugs does not equal to advocating drug addiction. It

may well lead to better understanding of the events that often lead to abuse.

I have also noticed that panelists tend to over-emphasise the role of peer pressure behind drug addiction, especially when it comes to the youth. Perhaps in most cases peer pressure is the main reason why a person goes down this troublesome path, but it is not the only one. Social circum-

stances, availability, legality, living in a toxic household or environment, attempt to self-medicate, pre-existing conditions – all of these factors can lead someone to substance abuse. I personally know someone who had been isolated and turned to drugs because of undiagnosed depression. These seminars, sadly, do not explore these topics.

There is also the issue of the target demographic. Most drug awareness campaigns I have come across deal with young people. However, addiction does not discriminate; anyone can succumb to this disease at any stage in life, whether voluntarily or by accident. For instance, among those who've lost their lives in the opioid crisis in the US, the numbers are lowest among people aged under 24. There should be more campaigns that appeal to all ages and walks of life, because nobody is immune to the risk of addiction.

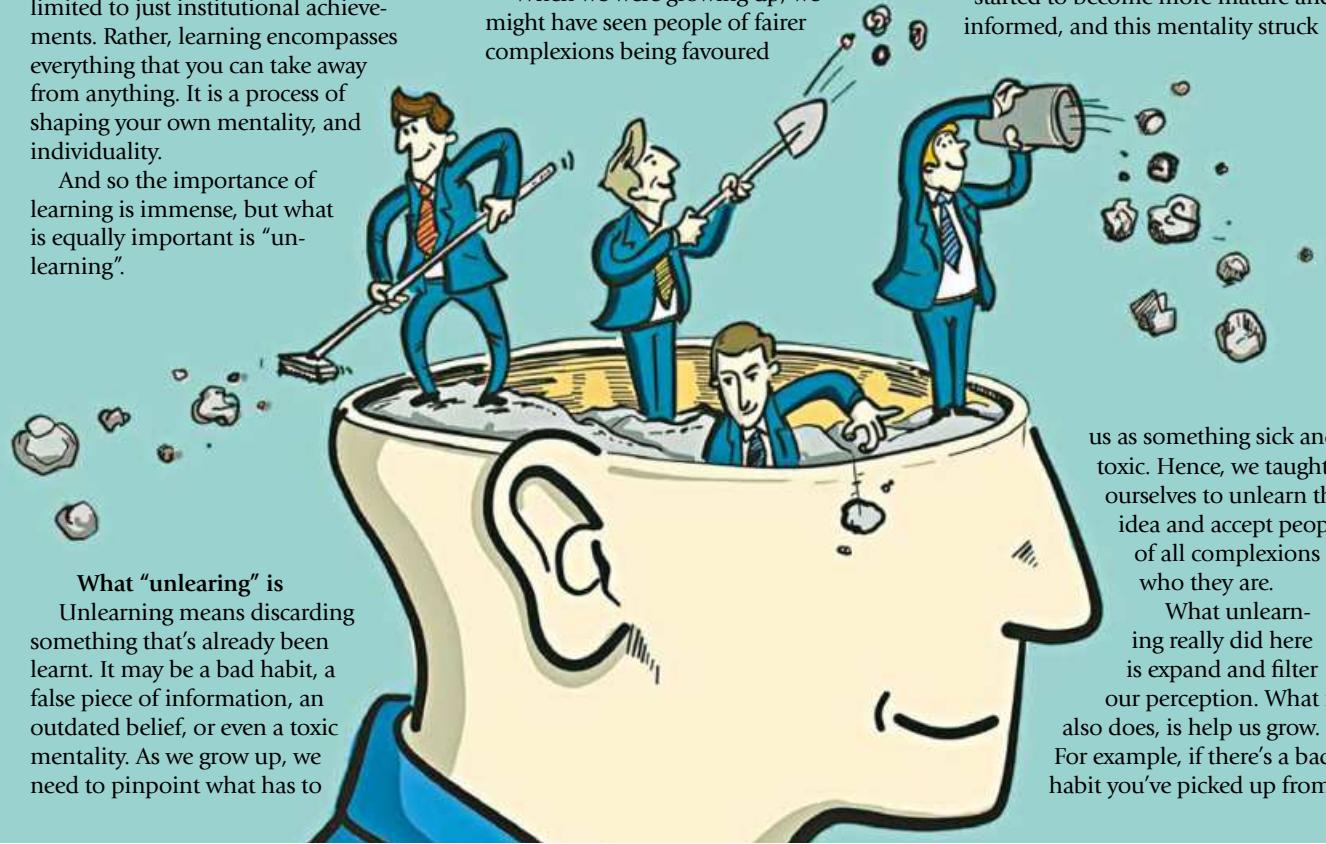
I hope future drug awareness campaigns will focus more on educating the masses, because a diverse range of factual information on the nature of drugs is very important for society to be able to fight drug abuse. After all, without the whole picture, one cannot really grasp the magnitude of the problem that is drug abuse.

Unlearning: Just a different kind of learning

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I think we are all aware of the saying, "Learning is a lifelong process", and while we attribute learning to formal education in most cases, in reality it is actually a collective process that is never limited to just institutional achievements. Rather, learning encompasses everything that you can take away from anything. It is a process of shaping your own mentality, and individuality.

And so the importance of learning is immense, but what is equally important is "unlearning".



What "unlearning" is

Unlearning means discarding something that's already been learnt. It may be a bad habit, a false piece of information, an outdated belief, or even a toxic mentality. As we grow up, we need to pinpoint what has to

be learnt, and what has to be unlearnt. As time gradually takes us forward, it is essential for us to look back, and evaluate what we've learnt over the years, and to judge if it's still valid or not.

What unlearning does

When we were growing up, we might have seen people of fairer complexions being favoured

over darker ones. Inherently, many took that pale complexion as standard, and saw other people with a similar mindset do everything they could to their

skin tone, in order to fit into that

standard. Gradually, however, we

started to become more mature and

informed, and this mentality struck

us as something sick and toxic. Hence, we taught ourselves to unlearn this idea and accept people of all complexions as who they are.

What unlearning really did here is expand and filter our perception. What it also does, is help us grow. For example, if there's a bad habit you've picked up from

somewhere, that's holding you back, then you need to let go of it. Real growth is all about adjusting and tweaking, and sometimes, unlearning is what gives you power over your own self. Family and society often impose different mentalities or norms over us, which we go on to accept without a word. But it is crucial for us to analyse whether what we are learning in such a manner is right, or wrong. If it is the latter, it's better to unlearn it.

Why unlearning is important

For young people, it is imperative to mould their own individuality. If you want to become your own person, it is better to have your own set of beliefs judged by yourself, rather than having pre-imposed ones. And for that, you need to constantly edge and brush up your knowledge. As we are at the brink of being adults, and taking our own responsibilities, it is high time we let go of the norms that felt wrong, but we used to follow anyway.

In the wake of adulthood, we need to find our own identity and for that we need to skim off what has been already there, but should not have. You cannot rewrite the chapters of your life, but you surely can learn and unlearn simultaneously from them, for the future ones.

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