

What role do you think substance use can play in catatonia?

Dr. McCall:

I think there are certain types of substances that can lead to an acute catatonic presentation — either excitement or stupor. Ecstasy/MDMA, ketamine is potentially another one, which is relevant since people now think ketamine is a great therapeutic, but of course, it can be diverted for things that are not so therapeutic. And a urine drug screen obviously is critical anytime you're faced with someone coming off the street into the emergency room with catatonic presentation.

But you still need to think broadly because the usual qualitative drug screen, at least the ones that I've had experience with, they look for opiate medications, benzodiazepines, barbiturates, THC or cannabis. Typically they don't look for ecstasy. They don't screen for ketamine and so forth. So it's always possible that despite a clean urine drug screen, an illicit drug may play a role in the presentation.

Cannabis in psychiatry is interesting. People that use cannabis will sometimes tell you they use it as a self-prescribed therapeutic to treat anxiety. And I recently talked to a man I was trying to enroll in a research study, and using cannabis was an exclusion. So I asked him about his use of cannabis. He said, "Oh yes, I smoke from the moment I get up in the morning until the moment I get in bed at night, all day long." And I thought, my goodness. So you have to wonder, what does that do to the brain and to your psyche?

There's good literature showing this — mostly comes from the schizophrenia literature — that cannabis use can precipitate psychotic presentations. Mostly people talked about schizophrenia, but I think it's possible that certain susceptible individuals could have a catatonic presentation precipitated by using cannabis. It's certainly not going to be universal, and most people seem to be able to use cannabis, escaping the more severe psychiatric consequences, but it's something to be considered. And fortunately, at least THC is one chemical you can detect on a routine urine drug screen. Another reason to get that as a matter of routine when, whether it's in the hospital or in the emergency room, when you see someone who's in a catatonic state.