

The Effects of Substance Abuse In Stephen Chbosky's novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

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Abstract

*Teenagers give in to the pressures of drugs and alcohol every single day. Whether or not adolescents are aware of it, their way of life and daily activities have a significant influence on the decisions they make. Novelist Stephen Chbosky wrote *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In the novel, 15-year-old Charlie writes a year's worth of "Dear Friend" letters to an unnamed older adolescent he hopes won't be offended by his references to drugs, intimacy, and mental health issues because he believes the older adolescent is not deprecating and won't be alarmed. This novel plays a vital role in accentuating the concepts of trauma, abuse, childhood trauma and other issues that teenagers go through and don't find a way to articulate the pain. The representation of mental illness, trauma and substance abuse are one of the key points in the novel. This study tries to explore and comprehend the impact of trauma and the fall of an individual into substance abuse in order to escape the pain. The writer analysis the novel and the characters thoroughly to conduct the study.*

Keywords: *trauma, substance abuse, mental illness, literature, post-traumatic stress.*

Introduction

The Perks of Being a Wallflower was released in February 1999. It is set in the early 1990s. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was one of the bestsellers and received numerous honours. Author Stephen Chbosky has done a remarkable job of drafting a captivating narrative that will enthrall his readers. Even a movie based on this book was released in 2012 and starred a number of well-known actors and actresses. The novel covers some sensitive topics such as post-traumatic stress, childhood trauma, substance abuse, suicide, depression, and domestic abuse. In a semi-autobiographical work, Stephen Chbosky tries to narrate a series of heart-wrenching experiences through the letters of a 15-year-old teenager who writes them anonymously to a senior who he gets to know about as a non-judgmental person.

Stephen Chbosky through Charlie brings his real-life experience to light, the part in his past when he lost his friend to suicide and was the traumatic experience of his life. Bullying, childhood trauma, abuse and substance abuse are some of the topics dealt with throughout the novel. Characters utilise a variety of drugs throughout *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* to endeavour an escape from their own misery, but doing so only makes them feel worse about their own sadness. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower's* high school setting is heavily influenced by drug usage, smoking, and underage drinking.

Charlie, the main character of this novel, is an introverted (anti-social) youngster who is also a victim of bullying. In addition, his family is impoverished. His family doesn't care about his issues or take care of him, but he has an aunt who does. Charlie avoids making himself known to others and never engages in conversation. He meets Sam and Patrick and becomes friends with them and that's when he is introduced to drugs and alcohol.

The study analysis the characters in the novel and their struggle with substance abuse and how the use of alcohol and hallucinogens is portrayed in the novel.

"The hallucinogens are drugs that are thought to induce hallucinations. These drugs are referred to as psychedelics. The major drugs in this category are LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) or 'acid', mescaline and psilocybin." (Butcher et al. 472)

When Charlie and his new group of companions struggle with their identities in Stephen Chbosky's novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, drug and alcohol misuse is also a prominent theme. During his first year of high school, Charlie befriends a gang of seniors who open his eyes to a whole new world of friendship, love, and drugs. They turn to substance misuse in the hopes that it would lessen the agony when things do not go their way.

A maladaptive pattern of substance use is what is meant by substance abuse. Use that results in clinically significant impairment or suffering, together with tolerance and withdrawal symptoms. (Gelder et al 2001)

Drug misuse is not just confined to psychoactive or mood-altering substances. Alcohol, amphetamines, MDMA, barbiturates, benzodiazepines, cocaine, mathaqualone, and opioids are some of the drugs that are most frequently linked to this phrase. In addition to potential physical, social, and psychological harm, use of these drugs may result in criminal penalties. The usage of drugs is a widespread issue across the world. (Shafiq et al. 2006)

Given that cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes toward drug use vary widely between cultures and geographical areas, it appears that the epidemiology of drug addiction in a given society is influenced by these factors. (Emmanuel et al. 2003)

Method

This research was done in the library. Stephen Chbosky's novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* served as the study's primary source. The researcher also used literature on substance abuse, behaviour, and trauma as sources. The research process involved analysing the primary source, to have a deeper understanding of each character and their habits. This procedure allowed the researcher to identify the characters' actions that contributed to their substance misuse. Throughout the research, the author gathered the information by reading the novel, summarising it afterwards, taking notes, and finally organising the information into categories.

Discussion

Trauma is a condition that develops after a horrible thing happened to a person. Children who experience trauma do so as a result of a damaging event that occurs to them during that period. Although many people who experienced childhood trauma are highly resilient, early trauma exposure is widely recognised to dramatically raise the risk for a number of psychiatric problems in adulthood.

Because of attempts to self-medicate or to reduce the symptoms of a dysregulated physiologic stress response, early traumatic experience may raise the risk of substance use disorders (SUDs). Contrarily, early beginning of substance use or misuse throughout adolescence may further impair the physiologic stress response by elevating plasma cortisol levels, raising the risk for PTSD and concomitant depressive symptoms. (DeBellis, 2002)

Charlie is an independent person when he starts high school. Charlie is introduced in the novel as a bright, perceptive, and unique individual who wants to fit in. The two friends Charlie makes along the way—Sam and Patrick—help him fit in as a result of exposing him to drugs and alcohol. All the characters take drugs and alcohol in the novel, either out of curiosity or to get away from a problem.

Charlie, Sam, and Patrick with other characters are used to alcohol and drug. With individual struggles and trauma to deal with, they find an escape in alcohol and hallucinogens. They tried a variety of drugs, including alcohol, cigarettes, LSD, and marijuana.

Charlie is somewhat in awe of his older peers at the homecoming party that he goes to with Patrick and Sam, and at the time, the presence of drugs at the party looks cool to him. That is the first time he ate a brownie and felt different.

"I ate the brownie, and it tasted a little weird, but it was still a brownie, so I still liked it. But this was not an ordinary brownie. Since you are older, I think you know what kind of brownie it was." (Chbosky, 35)

After his first experience with the drug, he began a part of the group. In an effort to blend in and engage in life, Charlie smokes marijuana and drinks with his friends. Whenever he needed an escape drugs became his way. His mind was filled with the thought of drugs, whenever he used to think of behaviour being odd, being high or on drugs used to be his reasoning behind it.

"Maybe my whole family has been high, and we just don't tell each other these things." (Chbosky, 82)

It seems that marijuana is the subject of discussion. Charlie's life is so consumed by drugs that he suspects his family may also be involved.

The hemp plant's leaves and flowering tips are what are used to make marijuana. Typically, it is smoked in the shape of cigarettes (variously referred to as weed, pot, joint ,stash) (Butcher et al. 474)

Soon things became intense for Charlie and his experience with LSD was something he regretted and promised to do it never again. Charlie did drugs to fit in and calm his nerves but this particular drug didn't help. He couldn't feel calm but made him suffer. He wanted the pain to end but his sensory nerves were hit in a different manner. Instead of being calm, he began to act oddly and did odd things.

“Things were worse an hour ago, and I was looking at this tree but it was a dragon and then a tree, and I remembered that one nice pretty weather day when I was part of the air. And I remembered that I mowed the lawn that day for my allowance just like I shovel the driveway for my allowance now. So I started shovelling Bob's driveway, which is a strange thing to do at a New Year's Eve party really.” (Chbosky, 94)

He wanted the impact of it to stop but it didn't happen.

“I don't really know what I'm saying. I probably shouldn't write this down because I'm still seeing things move. I want them to stop moving, but they're not supposed to for another few hours.”(Chbosky, 94)

LSD was taking a toll on him, it was making him feel detached.

After using LSD, a person often experiences changes in sensory perception, mood fluctuations, a sense of depersonalisation, and detachment feelings for around eight hours. The effects of LSD are not always pleasant. The distorted things, the illusory colour, and the unfamiliar lights might seem ominous and alarming, and it can be very upsetting. (Butcher et al. 472)

Charlie did feel the unpleasant and upsetting sensation which made him turn his back on this particular drug. Instead of forgetting about the unpleasant feeling, he started to feel it intensified.

“Regardless, I decided to never take LSD again.” (Chbosky, 100)

Even when he was ostracised by his group of friends and couldn't take the change anymore, he wanted to get out of this pain and emptiness and decided to do drugs to numb the pain. He buys from his easter money.

“After a week of not talking to anyone, I finally called Bob. [...] He said he had a quarter ounce of pot left. So, I took some of my Easter money and bought it. I've been smoking it all the time since.” (Chbosky 139)

“The book said that sometimes people take LSD, and they don't really get out of it. They said that it increases this one type of brain transmitter. They said that essentially the drug is twelve hours of schizophrenia, and if you already have a lot of this brain transmitter, you don't get out of it.” (Chbosky, 101)

Charlie is still miserable, and the pot only serves to dull him; it doesn't bring happiness. Finally after his finally relapse, he did understand the fact that there was no numbing done by these drugs but made his mental health worse and instigated all the repressed memories and he finally decide to give up on drugs.

When the novel begins we encounter Charlie, someone who is shy, an introvert with low self-esteem and his mental health was a topic of concern. His weird and different behaviour leads

him to live an isolated life and in desperate need of fitting in he finds some true friends. Although they might not have good habits yet their accepting nature gave him a sense of belonging but with a sense of belonging because of his childhood trauma and in order numb that pain, he fell into substance abuse. Although these drugs were meant to have a calming effect and silence his brain, the above-mentioned scenario makes it evident what happened to his brain.

These drugs only worsen his mental illness and with all the things crashing upon him, he almost killed himself. He loses control over his sense due to drugs and found himself in the hospital. Patrick is another character that deals with substance abuse throughout the novel. He is flamboyant and fully accepts himself and is openly gay. Although he was not free from the judgment of society. It might not have affected him much but the person whom he loved, was the one who became his reason for alcoholism. Patrick after Brad's betrayal started to drink and even started to take pills way more than before. One time he went to Charlie and it seemed that he hadn't showered.

"Patrick and I have been spending a lot of time together. We drink a lot. Actually, it's more like Patrick drinks, and I sip." (Chbosky, 161)

Patrick learns to be cautious about who he trusts and to only commit to someone if he is certain that he won't be duped or taken advantage of.

Therefore, the characters encountered challenges along the route that had both beneficial and negative effects on them. Each character embarks on a fresh adventure and turns a fresh page in his or her life.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is an intense connection between experiencing disturbing events and developing substance use issues. Many people who have gone through traumatic experiences like child abuse, sexual abuse, or other traumatic occurrences turn to alcohol or drugs to help them cope with their feelings of guilt, or panic. In order to numb the pain or to find a distraction, these elements feign a sense of help and escape. Thus making people with substance use more prone to traumatic incidents than to people without these issues.

Many people find themselves trapped in a toxic loop whereby experiencing traumatic events increases alcohol and drug usage, which in turn causes more traumatic experiences, which prompts an even increase in substance use. The characters in the novel do try to find an escape with this sort of mechanism but finally, understand the impact and effect of the things on their mental health and decide to move and leave things behind. Such relatable and understanding in the novel make such sensitive topics easy to understand and aid. Thus by analysing the characters the author was able to highlight the negative effects of abuse on an individual with the help of a novel.

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