

# Alberta MHA Cannabis and Youth Engagement Research

Report on Focus Group Findings  
September 2024

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# Project Purpose

## Why we are here...

This research aims to explore cannabis consumption patterns and the impact of perceptions—particularly post-legalization—on individual use, motivations, and perceived benefits. It also seeks to examine personal adverse experiences, perceptions of risks, potential harms, and how policy might be used to minimize these risks.

Specific project objectives include:

- **Consumption Patterns and Motivations:** How cannabis consumption evolves over time and varies between different product types. In what scenarios and for what reasons individuals choose to consume cannabis.
- **Perceptions of Cannabis Usage:** How social, peer, and parental perceptions of cannabis compared to other drugs and how these perceptions influence individual use.
- **Perceived Impacts:** Evaluate whether cannabis is perceived as having positive effects on various aspects of life (e.g., work, study, health) or negative.
- **Adverse Experiences and Risk Perceptions:** Personal adverse experiences with cannabis. How individuals perceive both the immediate and long-term risks associated with its use.
- **Policy Solutions:** What potential harms are related to cannabis use. How policy measures could be implemented to minimize these harms.

# Project Approach

How we  
conducted the  
research...

## **Two (2) focus groups were conducted:**

- Focus groups were conducted with cannabis users aged 18 to 25. All participants were current or previous users of cannabis, ranging from occasional to frequent use, and a mix of many methods (smoking, vaping, ingesting, etc.).
- All participants were recruited by a third-party recruiter.
- Groups were conducted September 4<sup>th</sup> 2024 in Calgary and September 5<sup>th</sup> 2024 in Edmonton.
- Each group was 90-120 minutes in duration.
- Participants were provided an incentive of \$150 for their participation.

# Key Findings

## 1

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### Use cases vary greatly from person to person.

Cannabis use is highly individualized, influenced by personal circumstances and preferences. Participants engage with cannabis in various contexts, ranging from recreational enjoyment to self medication. While some individuals seek cannabis for relaxation or social experiences, others may use it to manage their own wellbeing. Tolerance levels also play a significant role; frequent users often have higher tolerances, which can affect how they consume cannabis and the types of products they choose.

## 2

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### Young adults are aware of risks but largely unconcerned.

Consumers acknowledge the potential risks associated with cannabis, whether they are adverse experiences, acute side-effects, and long-term negative effects. These risks are seen as manageable with moderation, and unlikely to cause significant harm. Long-term risks remain less prominent in users' minds, and they typically do not view them as serious concerns. Most participants adopt some form of moderation of frequency, environment, and method in their use, balancing enjoyment with caution for potential downsides.

## 3

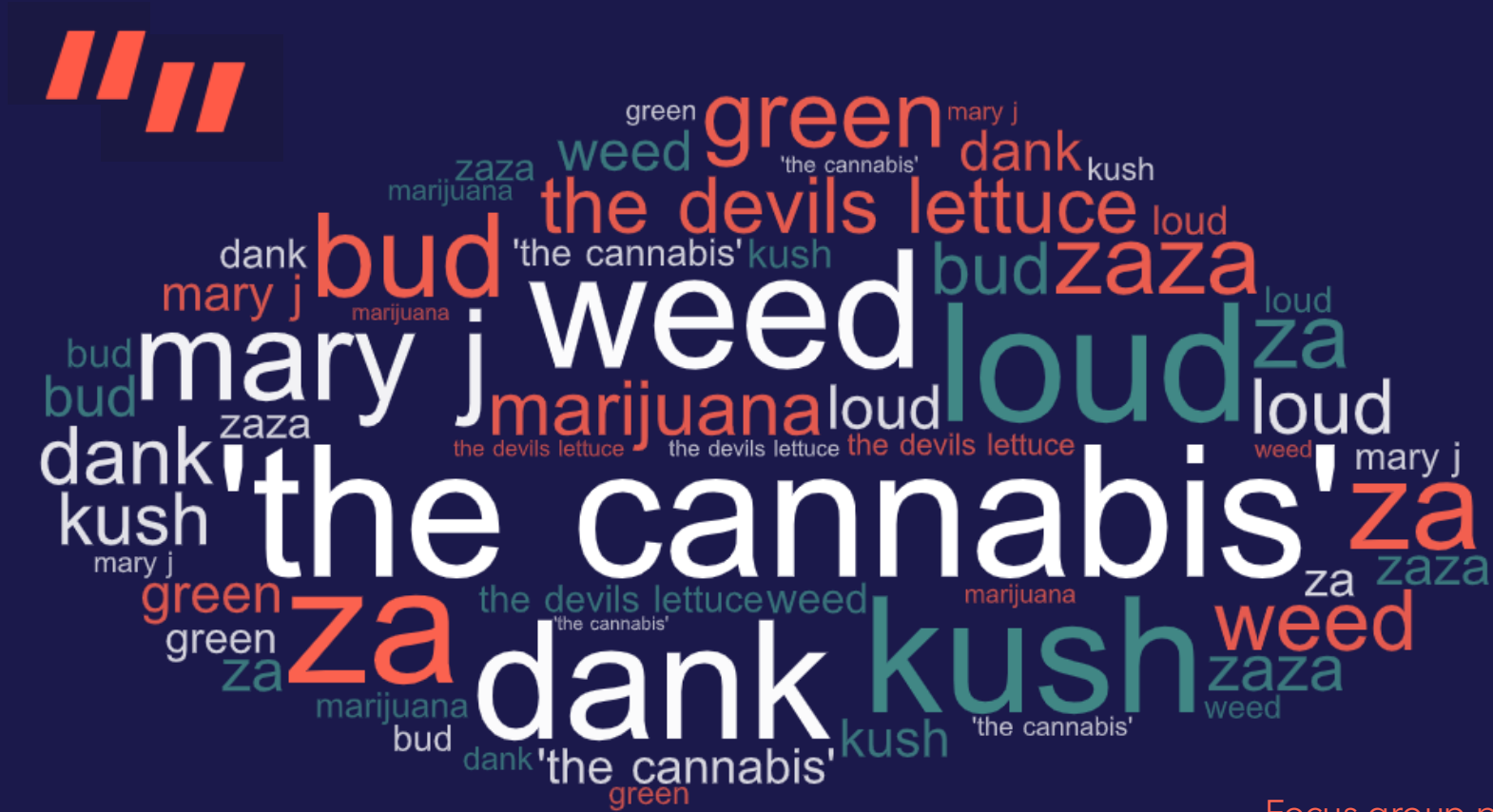
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### Consumers are content with the current policy framework.

Overall, participants express satisfaction with the existing regulatory framework for cannabis- *"The government is doing a pretty good job."* They feel current policies adequately facilitate access to cannabis products while maintaining safety. Many participants suggest that regulations could be adjusted to resemble those governing alcohol, advocating for similar marketing practices and event sponsorships, but with specific adaptations for cannabis. This feedback reflects a desire for continued improvement while recognizing the progress already made in creating a functional cannabis landscape in Alberta.

# Detailed Findings

## How do you refer to cannabis in casual conversation?



Focus group participants from  
Calgary and Edmonton, aged 18-25.



# Usage and Motivations

*"I personally love taking a gummy and watching a movie because I think differently about the movie."*

*"When I did use it [cannabis], largely it was just to counteract side effects from my medications. I was on stimulant medications for ADHD and weed fixed my appetite, my sleep, and stopped the hyper clenching of my teeth."*

*"I use it in a social setting, obviously, with like friends and stuff. Not all the time, but sometimes. And I usually use it when I'm really stressed out and when I just need a break and need to forget a little bit and stuff when life gets too much."*

*"I feel like it levels me out almost."*

## Usage

Cannabis is used both recreationally and medicinally (self-medicating). Recreational users seek an altered state of mind for enjoyment, while those using it medicinally aim to alleviate issues such as anxiety, poor appetite, and sleep disturbances. For many who use it consistently or medicinally, the goal is to achieve a feeling of normalcy or relief from discomfort. Some participants mentioned having a medicinal prescription for cannabis pre-legalization.

Users have a variety of consumption methods at their disposal, such as smoking, edibles, concentrates, and oils. Over time, they have found methods that maximize their enjoyment while minimizing negative side effects. Different types of edibles and dosages are selected based on personal preferences and tolerance levels. Users range from small dose (2 mg THC) edibles to smoking 90% THC concentrates. Some participants also referenced adjusting their consumption methods based on perceived risks- such as switching to edibles from smoking to protect their lung health.

## Motivations

The primary attraction of cannabis is its ability to alter mental states. Users understand that its effects can vary widely among individuals, both in terms of the way people experience it (e.g., reduce stress, increase anxiety, increase focus) and intensity. They are generally accepting of these differences, appearing to lessen the stigma around consistent use.

Individuals choose to consume cannabis in different contexts based on how it affects them; some might enjoy it in social settings, like with friends or at parties, to enhance social interactions and relaxation, while others prefer to consume alone for a more introspective or personal experience. These often differ from where alcohol is used; the stigma of cannabis use either alone or solo in a group setting is much less than compared to similar use of alcohol.



# Perceptions of Cannabis

*"post legalization and pre legalization have definitely been different. And I think everybody's pretty comfortable with it now because it's been a while [since it was legalized]."*

*"I think if you need to smoke every two hours, that's like, that's a bit much, um, frequency. But if you smoke like once or twice a day for your own sake, that's nothing wrong with that per se."*

*"When I consider a party drug, I usually consider something a bit harder, like cocaine or something. So I think of weed as maybe a social drug at most. Not a party drug."*

## Overall Perceptions

Cannabis is generally accepted and frequently discussed within peer groups. People feel comfortable talking about their use with friends and other people their age but are more reserved when it comes to discussing it with authority figures like teachers, parents, or colleagues. To describe being under the influence of cannabis, participants used the term 'high' colloquially and without stigma (in this report, we'll use the term 'high' to align with the terminology of this demographic).

Daily cannabis consumption is generally not seen as detrimental or problematic. Even when participants acknowledge a dependency, they do not view it negatively unless they notice a decline in their abilities or quality of life.

## Impact of Legalization on Perceptions

The legalization of cannabis has significantly reduced its stigma by framing it as a legitimate, safe, and regulated substance. The removal of cannabis's illegality has fostered more open conversations about its uses and benefits, normalizing its consumption, and alleviating the moral obligation to adhere to outdated laws. For example, some participants note that communication has opened up between authority figures and/or those older than themselves due to its legalization, when it wasn't before. However, there often remains a 'don't ask don't tell' mentality with authority figures (mostly parents/grandparents).

Since legalization, most individuals prefer purchasing cannabis from legal sources, primarily due to the accessibility and regulation offered by dispensaries. In contrast, buying from unregulated or illegal sources is often viewed as "sketchy" and unsafe, unless there is a pre-existing relationship with a dealer established before legalization, and/or the participant is a frequent and experienced user.

# Perceptions of Cannabis in Relation to Alcohol

*"I feel like they're both addictions, but I just think alcohol affects your life way more."*

*"In my opinion, I think alcohol is way worse on your body as a whole, and I think being under the influence of alcohol affects your activities and what you do way more."*

*"I think a big part of it is that liquor's been around for so long that we actually know how it affects people long term. Whereas for weed, legalization only came about eight years ago or whatever it was."*

*"I know when I'm high. I find when I'm like drunk I'll always be like, 'no, I'm not drunk, I'm not drunk.'"*

## Alcohol vs. Cannabis

Alcohol is compared, but not equated, to cannabis. Participants frequently compare cannabis to alcohol without prompting by the moderator (likely because it is a regulated substance that has impairing effects). However, there are significant differences in how the two substances are perceived. Alcohol is primarily regarded as more destructive and dangerous than cannabis.

While alcohol is often associated with party culture and has well-documented long-term effects, cannabis is generally associated less-so with other party drugs, and its long-term effects are less apparent. Additionally, despite cannabis being legal, there is still some discomfort when discussing its consumption, especially compared to alcohol, a substance that has very little stigma around casual consumption. This can be attributed to the difference in length of time since legalization.

When it comes to problem use, overconsumption of alcohol is associated with more severe negative perceptions and consequences compared to cannabis. The line between what is problem use for cannabis is less defined than when it comes to alcohol. Participants had difficulty defining what was a cannabis dependency or addiction, but there is a clear sense among participants about how they could identify a drinking problem. The issues related to alcohol consumption are more apparent and easier to identify compared to cannabis. Heavy cannabis use does not carry the same level of visible damage or social stigma as alcoholism. Cannabis use, particularly when self-medicating, is often viewed through a more lenient lens.

# Impacts and Impairment

*"I've noticed like my performance in school hasn't been as good. I used to be a really good student and now I struggle because I can't remember things. So like some poor memory. And that's the biggest one is like there's more brain fog and memory issues now than I ever had before."*

*"I know people that go to work high almost every time, and they are like fully functional."*

*"It's (going to work high) less of a risk and more of like, kind of like an unprofessionalism thing."*

## Impairment

The effects of cannabis are understood to vary significantly among individuals. While personal experiences influence consumption patterns, participants recognize that not everyone responds the same way. Some may feel impaired, while others who consume regularly might function normally, highlighting the role of tolerance.

There is considerable uncertainty about driving under the influence of cannabis. Users may not feel impaired, which complicates efforts to measure and regulate impairment. The effects of cannabis vary widely among individuals, making it challenging to establish clear impairment standards.

## Impacts on Work, School, and Life

In the workplace, cannabis use is generally viewed as unprofessional, though some believe it is acceptable if it does not pose a risk to others. While it may enhance creativity for certain jobs, coming to work high is frowned upon (and is one sign of problem use that the Edmonton group participants could generally agree on).

As for school, cannabis use can lead to decreased motivation, memory issues, and brain fog, which may hinder students' academic performance. While some participants avoid attending class under the influence, they recognize that others can still function effectively, depending on their individual tolerance and reasons for use.

In general, cannabis consumption is not perceived as negatively affecting daily life; rather, it is often seen as adding a fun or calming element. Negative impacts on overall quality of life are usually associated with long-term, frequent use and dependency.

# Perceptions of Risks

*"I notice it in my lungs, like I can't run as far and it kind of gets uncomfortable."*

*"I mean, if it (the risks) were to happen then yeah, I would be wary about it. But I don't know. I haven't had like any like self control or like breathing issues or anything. So it doesn't really worry me."*

*"I don't think it's as bad [to drive high vs. drive drunk]. But I've been in cars with people that are drunk and you can tell the difference. And I've seen aftermaths of drunk driving and I can't say I've seen the same for marijuana."*

*"I have one friend who smoked way more than he should have and luckily he was able to separate himself from it for a couple of years because of the paranoia. And then come back to it slowly."*

## Types of Risks

Participants categorize cannabis risks into three types: immediate adverse experiences, acute side effects, and long-term effects.

- **Immediate Adverse Experiences:** These include "greening out" (characterized by nausea, vomiting, dizziness, confusion, and general discomfort from excessive THC), as well as anxiety and paranoia.
- **Acute Side Effects:** Following consumption, users may experience brain fog, lack of motivation, and memory issues in the short term (over the course of a day or few days depending on use frequency).
- **Long-Term Effects:** Concerns include lung health, dependency or addiction, and potential mental health issues.

## Perception of Risks

The most immediate risk associated with cannabis is related to smoking, which is perceived to carry a risk profile similar to tobacco use. In contrast, edibles are viewed as "less risky" due to the absence of smoke and its associated health impacts. Some users prefer edibles to mitigate lung damage and feel they can better control their THC intake, thereby reducing the likelihood of immediate adverse experiences.

Users generally do not see their cannabis consumption as a significant health concern in the short-term. Long-term risks associated with cannabis (excluding those linked to smoking) are less recognizable and are not considered as severe as those related to long-term alcohol use.

The perceived risk of consuming laced or contaminated cannabis is eliminated when purchasing from regulated retail outlets. Participants express confidence in buying cannabis from stores, although there are concerns about adjacent, unregulated paraphernalia that may pose health risks.

# Negative Experiences and Engaging in Responsible Consumption

*"Like you have so much of it (THC) that you, I don't even know how to describe it. Like, you just completely lose all ability. You vomit. I had like no control over my body for like five or six hours. It was bad. That kept me away from it (cannabis) for like a couple of years."*

*"If I feel like I need a detox, like after I smoke a bit too much and feel my chest tightening or I'm coughing up or something, I might take a break for like a month or two and just do edibles instead of smoke."*

*"I've had horrible experiences with bong. Can't do bong. They scar me for life, but I still smoke."*

## Negative Experiences

The most significant negative experience reported is "greening out", which is akin to consuming far too much THC. This acute adverse reaction includes feelings of being excessively high, nausea, vomiting, paranoia, dizziness, confusion, visual impairment, and general discomfort. While quite unpleasant, it is temporary (and not dissimilar from consuming far too much alcohol).

## Responsible Consumption

Participants demonstrate a strong awareness of how they behave when high compared to when they are sober, as well as the effects cannabis has on their functioning. Most can engage in activities while high, and less frequent users often plan their activities to avoid negative experiences. They generally recognize their relationship with cannabis and can identify dependency, even if they don't perceive it as a problem. This "use awareness" appears to remain for most people, and some recognize that this awareness can be lost with alcohol.

Over time, participants notice an increase in tolerance, leading to a weaker and less enjoyable high. To manage this tolerance, many users take breaks—known as "T breaks"—to abstain from cannabis, allowing them to "reset their baseline" so that they can experience a more intense high upon resuming use.

Moderation is also a key strategy to prevent negative side effects, which can include acute issues like paranoia and anxiety, as well as longer-lasting effects such as brain fog and reduced motivation. It is common for users to reduce or cease consumption entirely if the negative effects begin to outweigh the benefits. Interestingly, many participants have experienced negative effects from alcohol but continue to consume it, whereas a negative experience with cannabis can often lead to a prolonged cessation of use.

*"I like how it's sold now, like it's regulated so you know exactly what you're getting. It's not a surprise. You don't get a surprise strain and it's not a surprise amount. You know exactly what you're getting and what you're going to be consuming."*

*"Liquor store companies do that (market and advertise) all the time and I see all the time gambling ads as well. So I think weed companies should be able to promote and advertise if they wanted to."*

*"I feel comfortable going into the dispensary. I think they're set up is great- it's friendly, it's transparent. In that regard, I think they're doing a good job."*

## Current Policy

Most participants are indifferent to current cannabis policy. They do not actively follow policy changes or have strong opinions, assuming that the government is managing it effectively. When asked how they feel the government is handling cannabis retail, there is a general consensus that the overall framework is acceptable and there is very little desire for more stringent regulations or looser controls.

## Future Policy

When pressed on any changes they would make, suggestions include earlier and increased education on the long-term effects of cannabis use, better measures to prevent minors from accessing cannabis, and stricter controls on unsafe grey market products that go hand in hand with cannabis consumption such as flavored oils, or paraphernalia that contain harmful toxins.

Participants naturally compare cannabis to alcohol, and this continued with how it should be regulated. They support the promotion of cannabis products similar to alcohol but advocate for regulations specifically tailored to cannabis. This includes allowing marketing and promotion with certain restrictions, such as sponsoring events for those aged 18 and older, advertising specific products while ensuring packaging is not appealing to children, and implementing age limits for purchase and consumption. Additionally, participants believe that sampling should be very restricted (or not be permitted at all) due to concerns about quantity, concentration, and driving safety (taking an edible or a vape hit will have drastically different impacts person to person compared to having a small sample wine or beer).

There is ongoing debate and uncertainty regarding the legal limits for driving under the influence of cannabis. Participants are unsure about how to measure impairment effectively and suggest that it is a more complex issue compared to alcohol.

# Considerations

## Where to from here...



### Policy

**Many express a willingness to liberalize cannabis policy regarding marketing and advertising.** There's support for regulations that would allow cannabis products to be marketed similarly to alcohol, but with an emphasis on responsible advertising practices. This includes age restrictions on ads and prohibiting packaging that might appeal to children. Participants also mention that, unlike alcohol, providing product samples feels unsafe due to varying tolerances and the uncertainty surrounding legal driving limits for cannabis. Despite the perception that alcohol has more negative effects overall, there is a consensus that cannabis should be regulated at least as strictly as alcohol.



### Education

**There's a strong desire for more education about cannabis.** Many want to learn about the long-term effects of use, how THC tolerance works, the different ways to consume cannabis, and what to expect after using various methods. This interest reflects a broader need for balanced, evidence-based information. Many participants wish that they had this information sooner.

**There is a call for clearer education on the guidelines regarding driving under the influence of cannabis, as this remains an area of obscurity for participants.**

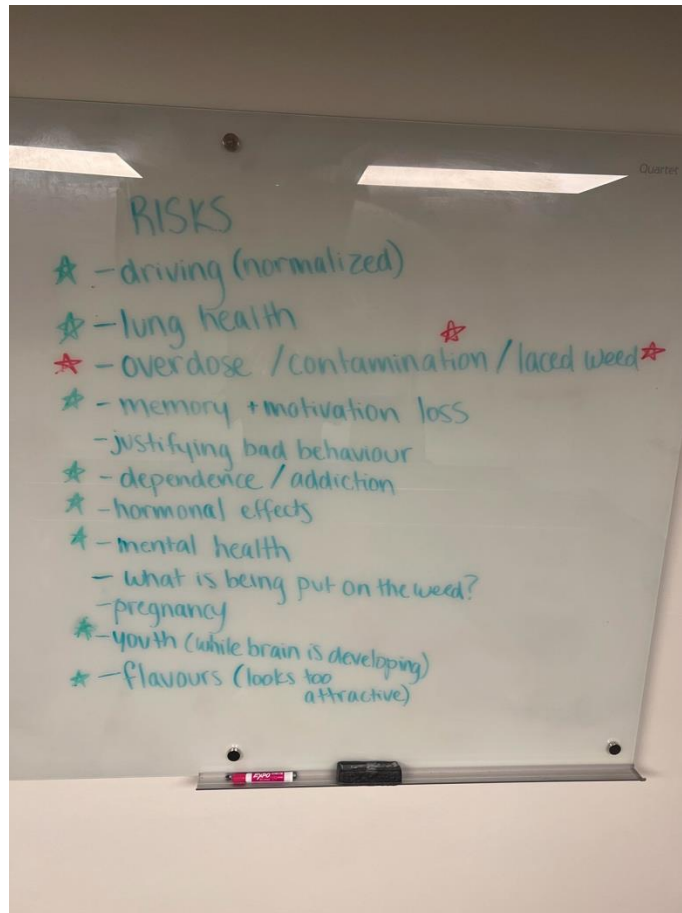


### Normalization

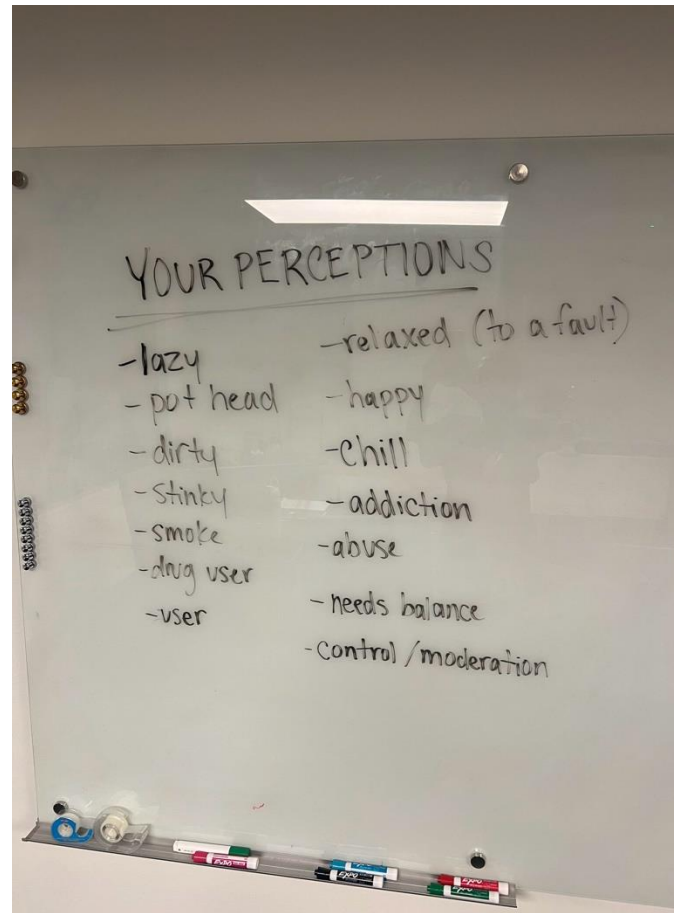
Users emphasize the value of dialogue between cannabis users and non-users, especially across generational lines, such as with parents and grandparents. **Normalizing conversations about cannabis is seen as a way to reduce stigma and foster better understanding of its use and effects.** Many equate the slowly dissolving stigma as an opportunity for normalized conversation about its use and effects, good or bad.



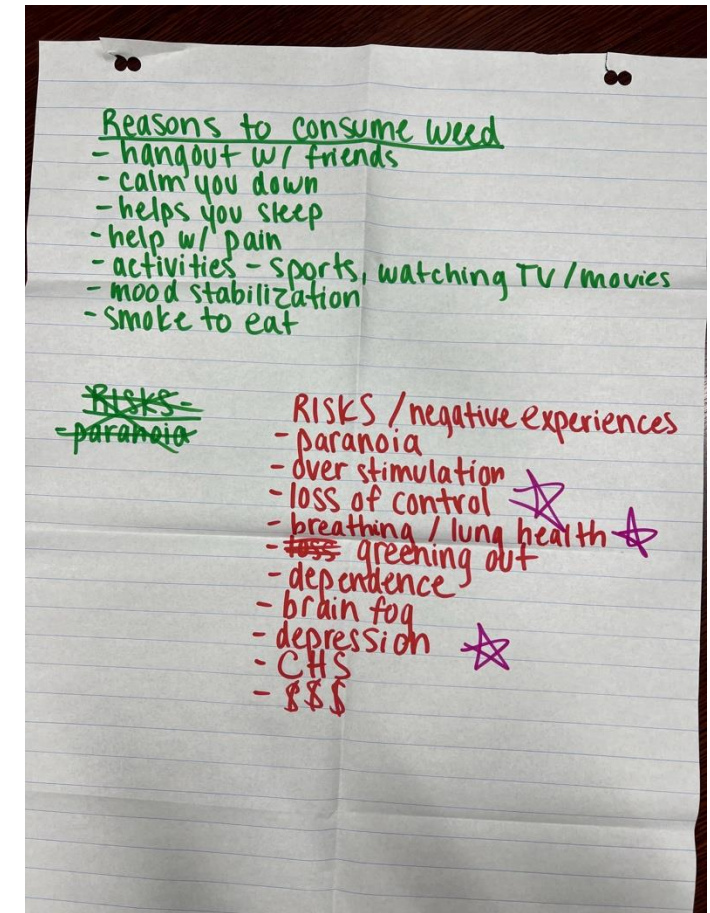
# Appendix



Calgary



Calgary



Edmonton



Thank you.

Understanding people. It's what we do.

# Understanding people.

It's what we do.

**Stone —  
Olafson**

**Questions or Comments?**

Please contact

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