

► This month ◀

OVER THE LINE

— By Alastair Mordey, The Cabin Chiang Mai —

THERE HAVE BEEN suggestions in the media recently – fuelled by comments made by former drugs tsar David Nutt – that bankers take an inordinate amount of cocaine. I've been trying (and mainly failing!) to point out that this is, at best, a generalisation and probably has little factual basis to it. But what do we actually know about drug abuse by occupation?

There have been studies carried out on the prevalence of substance abuse by job occupation. Ironically (or predictably, some might say) journalists are near the top, as are other media types and performers, but there is no mention of bankers. The Butler Centre for Research in 2009 found that the highest rates of substance abuse among workers in the US were typically found in the food-service, construction, arts, design, entertainment, sports and media occupations. Does this mean that bankers don't abuse cocaine (or alcohol or other drugs)? Of course not. But are lots of bankers likely to be cocaine addicts? Probably not.

Bankers are actually less likely to be suffering the advanced stages of addiction, where frontal-lobe damage and impaired decision making become a serious problem, because they have high-functioning careers and a lot to lose, and they simply wouldn't be able to perform if they were that impaired. They are, however, undoubtedly prone to drug abuse in similar numbers to other highly-driven people.

The prevailing view now among medical bodies such as the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in the US Health Department is

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that addiction (which can manifest early as substance abuse) is a primary, chronic brain-disease in which sufferers have a deficiency in pleasure/reward chemicals in the brain, particularly dopamine. Such people will require greater stimulation, reward and pleasure than the ordinary person in order to feel balanced or 'normal' and consequently they seek dopamine reinforcers (boosters), which could be drugs; but equally could be sex, risk, gambling, high status, acquiring monetary rewards and so on. So it is now becoming clear that not all addicts will medicate themselves with drugs or alcohol.

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Bankers have many sources of dopamine reinforcement at their disposal in their environment, not just cocaine and alcohol. Many people working in the financial sectors are drawn to excessively overachieving, ultra-competitive environments, risk-taking and drug use. We would once have said this is their 'personality type', but we now know it probably has a neurobiological basis to it. Those bankers who are prone to substance-abuse or addiction will be medicating themselves with all sorts of highly rewarding activities, some of which are very constructive and good for society, and some of which are not. So the reality is probably just that these bankers, like other driven people, are easily bored, enjoy risk and seek big rewards because they are wired that way.

On the upside, recovery from drug abuse and addiction for professional-types such as bankers is often embraced as an exciting adventure into a new and more rigorous lifestyle. Arguably, effective high-achievers become even more effective when living clean. For many (and you may even know some) recovery from abuse leads to a disciplined, even ascetic lifestyle, which can become the new drug. Doing in-depth psychological work builds

self-awareness, participating in extreme sports improves our physical strength, and learning mindfulness and meditation techniques provide us with a more robust emotional state and quicker, clearer thinking. In therapy, we can train ourselves to think in a Socratic way by disputing our own negative thoughts, which arguably develops a more challenging, positive and effective way of living, because even in recovery – or especially in recovery – the need for reward continues. ■

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