

ASU Online graduate studies harm reduction approaches in addiction psychology

Leanna Monahan combined research, clinical training and lived experience in ASU's addiction psychology program

By Laura Fields, ASU News
May 7, 2026

Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Leanna Monahan's academic path at Arizona State University has centered on understanding substance use from both scientific and human perspectives. This May, she will graduate with a master's degree in [addiction psychology](#) through ASU Online, within the [Department of Psychology](#) in [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#), a program that allows her to pair flexible coursework with on-the-job training.

As an undergraduate studying psychology and neuroscience in the Department of Psychology, Monahan examined how drugs affect the brain in Professor [Foster Olive's Addiction Neuroscience Laboratory](#). She chose to stay at ASU for graduate school, building on that experience while continuing to work and expand her clinical skills.

During her in-person practicum at ASU's [Clinical Psychology Center](#), Monahan worked with students cited for substance-related offenses, guiding them through intervention programs focused on safer use and second chances. These combined experiences informed her approach to substance use as both a biological process and a deeply personal one.

A later encounter with a harm reduction organization at a music festival further shaped how she puts that perspective into practice.

"People who use drugs deserve autonomy, compassion and support while they navigate these challenges, and that does not always equal abstinence," said Monahan, who is from Lodi, California. "Offering safe-use supplies can reduce the strain on our medical system by decreasing infections, the spread of disease and overdoses. By giving people the tools they need to use substances safely, they are able to make the choices that are best for them, which may include

making a change in their use.”

We spoke with Monahan about her experience and what comes next.

Q: How have your undergraduate degrees complemented your graduate field of study?

A: Chaotic substance use occurs due to a combination of psychological, biological and environmental factors, and these degrees gave me a well-rounded understanding of those. My psychology degree provided a strong foundation for advanced concepts and therapeutic strategies, while my neuroscience degree helped me understand the underlying mechanisms of substance use and how different substances interact in the brain.

Q: Can you briefly describe any culminating program experiences?

A: My applied project focused on risk and protective factors for substance use in autistic individuals. As someone with autism and ADHD, I have seen and experienced many of the challenges that can come from these conditions in the context of substance use. Autistic individuals are an understudied population in this area, especially those from minority groups. I hope to contribute to this research so that substance use is better understood and more effective treatments can be developed for this population.

Q: How would you describe your peers in the program?

A: My peers made the program much easier. I learned a lot from them, and everyone was always willing to help when someone had questions. We worked together to make sure no one was left behind and celebrated each other's successes.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?

A: Volunteer! One of the most important things about being a clinician is having empathy, and needle exchange programs are a great way to understand the needs of people who use drugs and are often most marginalized. These programs also show the value of autonomy. People who are not ready to change will not do so, and it can be helpful for clinicians to understand why.

Q: If given \$40 million to solve one global problem, what would you tackle and why?

A: I would address homelessness. Many people who use drugs do not become unhoused because of substance use. They become unhoused due to the rising cost of living and may turn to substances to cope. There are also abstinence requirements at many shelters, which can prevent people from accessing support.

Housing-first initiatives provide housing regardless of substance use and have been shown to reduce substance use, increase employment, improve school attendance and decrease hospitalizations and domestic violence. Everyone deserves a safe place to land before addressing other challenges.

Q: What comes next for you?

A: I plan to pursue licensure and hope to work at a harm reduction organization. I will also be applying to clinical psychology PhD programs with the goal of researching autistic women experiencing substance use.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



After becoming licensed as an addiction counselor, Leanna Monahan plans to work at a harm reduction organization and eventually pursue a PhD researching substance use among autistic women. Courtesy photo

Gallery



During her degree, Leanna Monahan worked with Sonoran Prevention Works, a harm reduction organization that provides safe-use supplies, free HIV and hepatitis C testing, and education for people who use drugs. She helped manage the distribution of naloxone, an opioid overdose reversal medication, across Arizona.



Leanna Monahan enjoys spending time outdoors with friends. During her program, she traveled with them to Santa Cruz, California.



Leanna Monahan is supported by her parents, Tricia and Todd. During her program, she married her husband, Christian, and was walked down the aisle by her mother and stepfather.



Leanna Monahan credits her husband, Christian, as a key source of support during her program. The couple married in 2024 and enjoy playing video games and spending time with their three cats.



Leanna Monahan was introduced to harm reduction through the organization DanceSafe in 2018. Since 2022, she has volunteered annually at the Gem and Jam Festival in Tucson, Arizona, providing harm reduction education to attendees.



In 2024, Leanna Monahan attended the Drug Policy Alliance's Reform Conference with Sonoran Prevention Works, where she learned from harm reduction advocates from around the world.