

2019

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Recommended Citation

Ehrenschwender, Angel (2019) "Adderall: Use and Abuse of Study Drugs on College Campuses," *The Synapse: Intercollegiate science magazine*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/synapse/vol20/iss1/11>

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Adderall

Use and Abuse of Study Drugs on College Campuses

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Illustrated by Barlow Wagner

Since the popularization of amphetamines as weight loss pills, nasal decongestants, and depression medications between 1930 and 1970, amphetamines have taken a hold of our society and have not loosened their grip. In the Netflix documentary *Take Your Pills*, researchers investigate how these same chemical compounds are being prescribed to the next generation ready to get its fix. Adderall, Ritalin, and other prescription stimulants are prescribed to individuals who suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, often at a young age, but use of this drug has moved beyond treatment of this disorder. Despite the classification of amphetamines as a Schedule II stimulant, their consumption in America today has surpassed that of the 1960s.

Becoming increasingly recognized as “study drugs,” prescriptions such as Adderall or Ritalin increase attention and allow users to focus in on a single task by eliminating distractions and encouraging efficient and productive brain functioning. They also cause alertness, often keeping users awake by increasing heart rate and blood pressure. While these drugs are often helpful and effective in treating ADD, their use has taken a recent turn. Used more and more commonly among college students without a prescription to stay up all night and cram for a test or to finish an assignment, their abuse in higher education has run rampant and has become a focal point of stimulant drug use. Recognized for their ability to induce cognitive enhancement, these drugs, obtained illegally and often mixed with other drugs to produce dangerous effects, have become all too prevalent on college campuses. Having grown accustomed to this culture, one student from the documentary remarked that she “forgets that it is illegal” to sell her prescription pills to others, though it is considered a felony in the United States. Another student equated amphetamine consumption to eating a good breakfast or drinking a cup of coffee in the morning, not recognizing that the potential health and criminal consequences could be detrimental.

In addition to use in the classroom, these same study drugs have permeated into sports culture as well as the workforce after graduation. Although most widely recognized for their effects on attention, they also boast the ability to reduce pain and speed up reaction time, which could give athletes an advantage in competitions. Used by athletes such as Olympic gold medalists Michael Phelps and Simone Biles, as well as CEOs and white-collar workers trying to get ahead, the abuse of stimulant drugs has no clear end. In our hypercompetitive world, individuals are turning to a bottle of pills to supply the edge necessary to succeed.

The culture of study drug usage and cognitive enhancement centers around widespread disillusion in the higher

education system. In *Take Your Pills*, several students and athletes comment on the developing obsession to get ahead, setting the curve. The pressure to perform in the classroom and on the field has driven many to great lengths and in this case, beyond legal limits. However, when a student is conditioned to find their value and worth in the letter written on the top of a test, they will do almost anything. This unhealthy cycle of competition and drug abuse ultimately spurs increasing and overt drug abuse among college students.

In a generation of instantaneous information coming from every direction, we are willing to do anything for a quick fix. If a student needs to study all night, then they just “pop an addy.” But, at what cost? Chronic users in the documentary commented on anxiety, nausea, headaches and a general feeling of “not being yourself.” Are we willing to sacrifice who we are for a grade? These drugs are being prescribed at earlier and earlier ages despite minimal studies concerning the long-term neurological and physiological effects of chronic use. When prescribing any drug prior to complete brain development, we must recognize this potential risk. This uncertainty is disregarded, however, as Adderall and Ritalin are still prescribed at an astonishingly high rate in the United States. The drug companies, working to make millions off of the American consumer, have created a culture of prescribing to “cure” in doctors’ offices. The result is over prescribing to an already overmedicated generation of young people.

While the medical system is partially at fault, responsibility also falls on the culture surrounding higher education. Colleges broadcast lower and lower acceptance rates, and then push students to perform well in and out of the classroom once they step on campus. All of this, however, is necessary to get the best job with the highest pay, or move on to the most prestigious graduate school programs. But how many could credit a portion of their success to a small blue or orange pill? And at what cost? Is this pill enhancing who we are, or forcing us to be something we are not?

Something has to interrupt this never-ending cycle. Medically, prescription of these drugs has to be regarded as a possible remedy rather than the “cure all” that it has become. In addition, leaders in higher education have to recognize the consequences of the culture they have cultivated on college campuses and work toward healthy change. And finally, students have to understand the incredible risk and responsibility associated with every pill that they take. Ultimately, the decision to take these drugs is ours. In breaking the addiction, whether it be to the pill itself or the grade associated with it, we gain freedom to be ourselves. ● ● ●

