Prescription Stimulant Medication Abuse Among College Students

Prescription stimulants—such as Adderall—is the most common medication used by college students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Weyandt, Marraccini, Gudmundsdottir, Martinez Zavras, Turcotte, Munro, Amoroso, 2013). For this reason, prescription stimulant abuse has dramatically increased among colleges and universities over the past ten years. Statistically speaking, studies estimate a 4-14% yearly incidence of prescription stimulants usage by college students without ADHD (Hartung, Cleveland, Mignogna, Correia, Canu, Lefler, Fedele, Leffingwell, 2013). In comparison to other drugs ingestion, these statistics surpassed the incidence of cocaine, hallucinogens, or other inhalant drugs, and almost doubled the prevalence of prescribed stimulant use (Hartung, Cleveland, Mignogna, Correia, Canu, Lefler, Fedele, Leffingwell, 2013). It is a fact that students, who abuse prescription stimulants the most, are those students who do not have ADHD. For this reason, the main purpose of this paper is to focus on those students who do not have ADHD, but are non-medical users of prescription stimulants. In order to do this, this research will analyze the predictors of nonmedical use of these stimulants, the factors that motivate students to take these prescription medications, the consequences of these drugs on students with ADHD, and students without ADHD, and some recommendations/preventions.

As captious beings, people tend to criticize and predict someone’s behavior based on how they see him/her. Some predictors of illicit use of prescription stimulants include: being male, being a member of fraternities and sororities, being an alcohol or drug
dependent, and certain personality traits such as being a sensation seeker or a perfectionist. During spring, 2009, one study was conducted on 206 students who were enrolled in psychology classes. These students were between the ages of 18 and 24 years, and they were asked to voluntarily fill out a questionnaire. The goal of this questionnaire was to obtain evidence on the recreational ingestion of these medications during the past year. Participants were asked to report the occurrence of their prescription stimulant use. Moreover, they were supposed to indicate which stimulant they used. Furthermore, impulsiveness was tested with a UPPS-P Impulsive Behavior Scale, which measured five dimensions of this personality trait: absence of planning, sensation seeking, lack of determination, and positive and negative stress. The high levels of alcohol ingestion were measured with the Ten-item Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test. The results of the study showed that there were 52 students who used prescription stimulants, and among this population; 39 people use Adderall, 5 people testified ingestion of a different prescription stimulant, 2 reported consumption of a nonprescription stimulant, and 6 failed to mention which stimulant they used. Finally, scientists found that alcohol use predicts the illicit usage of prescription medications, and also, investigators found that impulsive personality traits were forecasters of the illegal use of prescription stimulants, as well. (Lookatch, Dunne, Katz, 2012).

With regards to this study, one must consider the factors that motivate the use of these stimulants. Students’ reasons for usage vary from academic purposes (studying, completing homework) to recreational practice (getting high, loosing weight). Furthermore, there are four additional factors contributing to Adderall abuse. Firstly, there is the pressure to succeed. For example, parents who have high educational
expectations on their children, students who compete about grades with their friends, children who face with all the admission requirements when entering colleges/universities, and students who put pressure on themselves because they have high educational goals (Varga, 2009). Secondly, there also exist socio-cultural expectations, like following friends’ advise about the good consequences of ingesting these drugs (Varga, 2009). Thirdly, the collegiate life, which includes partying/studying all night long, or being involved in many organizations/clubs (Varga, 2009). Finally, there is an easy access to prescription stimulants.

Adderall is readily available to students from various sources. First of all, anyone can obtain a prescription from the campus health center (Varga, 2009). For example, there was a student who reported that all she had to do in order to get an Adderall prescription was to fill a questionnaire of 10 questions (Varga, 2009). Furthermore, students tend to practice “doctor shopping”. In other words, students visit different doctors, so they can get various prescriptions. People might think that insurance companies have a say on this issue because they regulate medication purchases, but the truth is that students can easily go to different pharmacies and buy the stimulants by claiming that they do not have insurance. In addition, people can purchase the medication from other students (diversion) (Varga, 2009). As a matter of fact, diversion-related research examining the behavior from those holding a prescription, estimates that the percentage of students that diverted their medication ranges from 8% to 36%. The primary impetus for giving away and buying these medications was related to improving academic performance; students who sold their medication were motivated to do so to
make extra money for both current and lifetime diversion (Gallucci, Martin, Usdan, 2014).

Some of the consequences the intake of prescription stimulant medication has on people with or without ADHD include that in accordance to the Controlled Substance Act, prescription stimulant medication enters into the category of schedule II regarding the fact that, the abuse of these stimulants leads to addiction (Swanson, Wigal, Volkow, 2011). Also, for students with ADHD these medications can help them improve their attention, impulsiveness, memory and shyness. (Weyandt, Marraccini, Gudmundsdottir, Martinez Zavras, Turcotte, Munro, Amoroso, 2013). Conversely, for students without ADHD, there are side effects that last a brief period of time, such as gastrointestinal difficulties, fuzzy vision, increased body temperature, increased blood pressure, increased heart rate, reduced circulation, irritability, and insomnia (Varga, 2009); and also, there are long-term effects like hallucinations, psychotic incidents, cardiac blocks, entering into a comma, mood changes, and physical and mental anxiety (Varga, 2009). In addition, students who illegally use these medications tend to become addicted and tolerant. In fact, students who abuse Adderall are 20 times more likely to get involved in the ingestion of other drugs, such as cocaine and heroin (Varga, 2009). For example, for people who enter withdrawal they can become more aggressive, anxious, and tired (Varga, 2009).

It is important to have in mind that the majority of college students tend to mix prescription drugs—amphetamines, antidepressants, alcohol, and energy drinks—without knowing the damage they are causing to their bodies. This is the reason why colleges and universities should develop, implement, and evaluate preventative and intervention
programs—aimed at reducing student misconceptions about the dangers of stimulant use—and the risks of concurrent use of stimulants with alcohol, tobacco, antidepressants, and/or other drugs (Vo, Neafsey, Lin, 2009).

According to Varga (2009) some of the recommendations suggested to decrease or sanction the illegal ingestion of prescription stimulants include: Colleges and universities must implement the Drug-free Schools and Campuses regulations and the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, or commonly known as the “Rave” Act in order to prohibit and sanction the diversion or possession of these stimulants around colleges and universities. Moreover, institutions should provide students with an educational seminar about prescription stimulants, and they should invite the DEA in order to increase the seminar’s credibility and seriousness of the consequences of the intake of these medications. Furthermore, faculty and staff members should be 100% aware of the symptoms and behaviors of the people involved with stimulants’ consumption and diversion in order to react properly when presented with a situation. Also, there should be a counseling seminar for parents and representatives of students, so they could learn how to listen and support their children, instead of constantly pressuring them. Finally, medical and pharmaceutical majors should include classes regarding prescription misuse and diversion consciousness (Varga, 2009).

In conclusion, it is a fact that students without ADHD are taking prescription stimulants for several reasons. Some students are even mixing the ingestion of different substances without truly knowing the damages they are provoking to their bodies. Males, alcoholics, students involved in fraternities and sororities, and students with impulsive personality traits (sensation seekers, perfectionists) are most likely to ingest prescription
stimulants. Some of the factors that motivate this practice are pressure from parents, friends, or themselves; wanting to stay up all night to study or to party, and wanting to get better grades at school. This is the reason why the solution to this problem is majorly education. Students, faculty members, staff and parents should all be aware of the non-medical abuse of prescription stimulant medications, so everyone can help prevent students from involving in the ingestion of these drugs.
References


