

## **Misuse of Stimulant Medications in Postsecondary School**

*By Heidi Bernhardt*

I read about a new study of US College students focusing on the misuse of stimulant ADHD medications with great interest. I have been asked about this issue during several media interviews over the past few years and have spoken to students in university towns who experience difficulty having their prescriptions filled. This difficulty is often due to physicians who are reluctant to fill those prescriptions or diagnose students with ADHD for fear that they are drug seeking.

A few years ago I also had a disturbing discussion with a group of university students who felt that it was perfectly fine to, as they put it, “remove the middle man” (the physician) when acquiring stimulant medication. During interviews and when speaking I have always voiced my feeling that this issue is far more complex than the stereotype of a lazy students misusing ADHD medications as a study aid.

I’d like to raise several questions on this issue with the principal question appearing first:

- 1. Why do postsecondary students without ADHD feel the necessity to misuse a regulated substance to function and succeed in college or university?**
- 2. Is it simply a matter of bad study skills, procrastination, or a life of partying, all requiring cramming sessions (all-nighters) late in the term?**
- 3. Or are students under too much stress to succeed at all costs, making the learning environment too competitive, and leading students to feel that they need an edge in order to be successful?**
- 4. Are students just lazy and looking for an easy ride or are some financially strapped and taking on part time jobs while in school?**

I often wonder how many of the students misusing medications actually have ADHD and are either unaware or in denial, or may be “just cutting out the middle man.”

As stated in one of my blogs last year a recent study on the use of cognitive enhancers ([www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0028390812003577](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0028390812003577)) found that while there was some improvement for students with below average baseline readings, taking medication without having ADHD actually hurt the performance of students with average or above-average readings. The study

also found that the average student did not improve their educational success, even though students felt that the medication aided their performance.

It seems that post-secondary education institutions should be doing a better job of informing their students of this data and the health risks associated with using medications that have not been prescribed.

The survey was conducted by Harris Poll for the newly-created Coalition to Prevent Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Medication Misuse (CPAMM), a network of organizations developing an educational strategy for college students focusing on reducing the misuse of ADHD medications amongst college students.

The study found that while students generally felt that they are aware of the risks of misusing ADHD medication, further investigation found that this was incorrect. Most expressed understanding why some students decide to use the medication, especially when taking into account the pressure to succeed in today's post-secondary environments.

The majority of students believed that misusing stimulant medication (75%) was unethical and a form of cheating similar to athletes using performance-enhancing drugs. However, almost half of these students also felt that those who do take these medications without the presence of ADHD were doing what was necessary to keep up with extreme pressure. Most felt that the main reasons students were misusing these medications was to get better grades and to succeed.

CPAMM hopes to create peer-to-peer interventions to assist with the common misconceptions that misusing ADHD medications leads to better grades, is not harmful and that "everyone is doing it", and to provide information of better ways to cope with educational stress.

This certainly looks like a step in the right direction.

For further information on this study visit: [www.uloop.com/news/view.php/144465/College-Students-Split-On-ADHD-Prescript](http://www.uloop.com/news/view.php/144465/College-Students-Split-On-ADHD-Prescript).