

THE ADDERALL DILEMMA

Truth About Prescription Stimulant Abuse

Script with Discussion Questions & Notes

Narrator: The National Council on Patient Information and Education¹ tells us the following: by a student's sophomore year in college about half of their classmates will have been offered the opportunity to abuse a prescription drug; 90% of college students who used Adderall non-medically in the past year also reported as binge drinkers, and these students were also five times as likely to have abused a prescription painkiller in that time; and more than half (54%) of undergraduates who are taking stimulant medications under the direction of their doctor have been asked to sell, trade or give away their medication in the past year.

So, we seem to have an "Adderall Dilemma" on our campuses. Many students may feel that using these types of medications without a legitimate prescription is OK; in fact some may view the non-medical use of drugs like Adderall to study or party as being safe and legal. Let's think about this by considering two short skits followed by discussions with our audience aimed at dispelling these myths.

Scene 1: Pharming to get by?

Narrator: In her article entitled "The Prescription of a New Generation,"² author Meika Loe writes that "U.S. college students today are among the first to be raised in a society where prescription drugs are an everyday commodity – socially branded and advertised directly to consumers – not unlike cars and blue jeans." She suggests that this phenomenon may contribute to the misuse of common prescription stimulants among college students who are "pharming to get by," meaning "they believe that with the help of prescription stimulants they can block out distractions to concentrate on academic performance and become smart and studious on demand."

So we ask the question – are students pharming to get by? And if so, what else do they need to know about the potential dangers of this behavior.

It's Monday night. Taylor, a college sophomore, is in the dorm working on homework and listening to music. Taylor is interrupted by Jamie, a friend who is a first-year student.

Jamie: Hey, Taylor!

Taylor: Hey, what's up?

Jamie: Not too much, just studying for two awful exams tomorrow.

Taylor: You have two exams tomorrow? Bummer!

Jamie: Tell me about it – AND, they're in my two hardest classes, AND they're both in the morning!

Taylor: Whoa – I am not jealous.

Jamie: Yeah, right? So listen, speaking of all this... remember how the other day we were at dinner and you mentioned something about having ADHD?

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Taylor: Oh, yeah. Why?

Jamie: So, like... do you take any medicine for that?

Taylor: Well... yeah. I take Adderall.

Jamie: Oh man, that's good. So listen, I need to ask for a huge favor. Tomorrow is going to be so awful, and I have so much left to study – could you give me just a couple of them?

Taylor: Oh, wow. I don't know, I mean, I've never actually let anyone else take one before.

Jamie: Don't worry; it's not a big deal. I mean, you probably don't remember to take it every day, right? So you probably have a few left over?

Taylor: I guess...

Jamie: See, you won't even miss them.

Taylor: Well, it isn't just that. Why didn't you just start studying sooner?

Jamie: I mean, I was studying earlier; but then Emily wanted to go get dinner, and then we ran into Dan and Cory, so we hung out with them for a bit – I mean, I just had other things to do. Plus, I'm really tired, and I haven't been feeling good ever since that party last weekend... I just need a boost, ya know? Taylor, please?

Taylor: Listen, I want to help you - it's just that Adderall is legit. I have to get a new prescription for it every month, and the pharmacist where I pick it up is always reminding me of all of these side effects it has...

Jamie: Taylor, I don't think it's really that big of a deal. Lots of the kids at my high school used it all the time. I have friends here now who do it, and obviously they're surviving – one of them even told me they'd never study without it again. I don't even think any of them have had any of these, so called, "side effects" at all.

Taylor: Yeah, but what if YOU did have side effects? I even do sometimes! And Jamie, do your friends really use it all the time? Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure the reason I have to get a new prescription every month is because it can be abused...

Jamie: Abused? Like a drug? Seriously? I've never heard of anyone really being addicted to Adderall. Besides, I'm just taking it this one time, Taylor. And think about it, YOU take it every day, right? If you can take it, why can't I?

Taylor: Because I actually have ADHD, Jamie!

Jamie: I mean, I think I do, too. I'm always getting distracted, which is why I hate studying so much. Taylor, I'm not arguing with you, I just don't want you to think it's such a big deal. I promise I'll be fine, and honestly, without it I don't know if I'll even pass these exams. Please Taylor? C'mon, please?

Discussion Questions

[**Note:** The facilitator may pick and choose from the following discussion questions. However, we do recommend always starting with discussion question #1.]

1) What would you do if you were Taylor? Why would you want to share? Why wouldn't you?

2) Jamie says it's been hard to study because: "...I mean, I just had other things to do. Plus, I'm really tired, and I haven't been feeling good..." Do you think this justifies asking Taylor to share a prescription medication? Why or why not?

3) Prescription stimulants were not meant to be quick fixes for occasional use as study aids – they were not approved for this, and the long-term effects of this style of use are unknown. Can you think of any safer, healthier study alternatives that Jamie should consider?

[**Notes:** Consider these healthier study alternatives:

- Stay current with class material and work. Review a little every day.
- Establish good study habits and a regular study schedule. Set aside extra time before important tests or deadlines.
- Use healthier "stimulants" – snacks, exercise, and even caffeine in moderation.
- Use your other available resources (TAs, professors, tutors, friends, etc.) to get help when needed.
- Establish a study group to help reinforce your learning.]

4) Is cramming and the use of so-called "cognitive enhancers" (i.e., prescription stimulants) the best way for a student to learn and synthesize material? More importantly, what ramifications could Jamie's current approaches to studying have for one's future professional life?

[**Notes:** Jamie says, "...I'm just taking it this one time..." How likely is that? Jamie also says that a friend "...told me they'd never study without it again." What does this mean in terms of developing the skills and habits necessary to be a successful professional in the long run?]

5) Jamie claims knowing people who have used Adderall non-medically without harm, so she feels comfortable misusing Taylor's prescription stimulant due to this perception of safety. But Taylor notes that "... the pharmacist where I pick it up is always reminding me of all of these side effects it has..." So, is there any risk in using a prescription medication like Adderall without medical supervision?

[**Notes:** Prescription stimulants, like all medications, come with side effects or unwanted reactions to the drug. The most common side effects are generally mild and include headache, dizziness, increased heart rate, nausea, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, dry mouth, agitation, anxiety, and insomnia; however, the actual percentage of patients experiencing each and the severity of the side effects may vary. More serious side effects are less common, but have been reported. These include: an increased risk of serious cardiovascular events (such as abnormal heart rhythm, high blood pressure, and even heart attack or stroke); an exacerbation of psychiatric conditions (such as mania, bipolar disorder, or anxiety disorders); visual disturbances; and a lowered seizure threshold. The package insert for Adderall XR® contains the following serious "black box" warning:³ "Misuse of amphetamines may cause sudden death and serious cardiovascular adverse reactions."]

6) Why is a prescription required for medications like Adderall?

[**Notes:** When a medication is approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), they designate whether that medication can be safely taken without a prescription or not. If a prescription is required, it has been determined that there is enough risk to dictate medical supervision. When a person is prescribed a prescription stimulant, the doctor must consider the patient's specific condition and its severity, as well as the patient's other unique factors when choosing a drug, a formulation, and a dosage. Just because a medication is right for one person does not make it is right for another, even if they are close in age, weight, etc. Patients can react differently to medications, even after the first use. The Adderall XR® package insert asserts this: "Individual patient response to amphetamines varies widely. Toxic symptoms may occur idiosyncratically (i.e., unpredictable) at low doses."³]

7) An individual's decision to take a prescription drug non-medically has many potentially serious ramifications, but the choice to share a prescription with others has even more. If Taylor shares this medication, is this actually doing Jamie a favor, or is there real potential to bring Jamie harm? If Jamie is harmed, what consequences might this have for Taylor?

[Notes: In response to Jamie's assertion that others have used Adderall non-medically without problems, Taylor says "Yeah, but what if YOU did have side effects?" How would you feel if you shared a prescription medication with a friend and they were harmed? Do you think you and your family could be liable if this happened?]

8) Jamie questions if using a prescription stimulant non-medically constitutes "abuse" and states that "...I've never heard of anyone really being addicted to Adderall." Do you think medicines like Adderall can be addictive?

[Notes: Adderall and other prescription stimulants are classified as a "Schedule II" controlled substance by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) due to a high potential for abuse. Stimulants like Adderall are also known to have addictive potential, especially when they're being used without medical supervision. The package insert for Adderall XR® contains the following serious "black box" warning⁴: "Amphetamines have a high potential for abuse; prolonged administration may lead to dependence."]

9) Jamie says, "I mean, I think I [have ADHD], too. I'm always getting distracted..."

What is ADHD? How does someone get diagnosed with ADHD?

Is ADHD safe to self-diagnose? Is ADHD safe to self-treat?

[Notes: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (or ADHD) is a complex behavioral disorder characterized by symptoms like difficulty paying attention, hyperactivity, and/or impulsivity that are distractive and inappropriate for one's developmental level. ADHD is more than just occasional distraction or apathy; ADHD is a chronic condition characterized by significant impairment at school, work, or in social functioning. As with almost any disease or disorder, the diagnosis of ADHD must be interpreted and declared by an experienced healthcare professional. ADHD should not be self-diagnosed, neither should it be self-treated.]

10) Some people think that using a prescription stimulant for academics is like using anabolic steroids for athletics – that they're both "cheating". How are these situations alike? How are they different? Does either or both constitute cheating? Why or why not?

Scene 2: Uppers, downers, and on-the-grounders

Narrator: It's Friday night. Casey and Alex, both college juniors, are at a house party near campus. They've just arrived and the two are leaning against a wall while party music plays and their peers drink and chat around them.

Casey: This party isn't too bad, right?

Alex: I don't know, I guess it's ok. Who do you even know here?

Casey: Actually, not too many people – it's my friend's friend's place.

Alex: For real? Well then I guess we're just gonna have to jump in. Go introduce yourself to those two over there.

Casey: No way, you go first.

Alex: It's YOUR "friend's" party.

Casey: So then YOU owe me for bringing you here!

Alex: Ok, whatever – let's go grab some drinks. A few beers in, and neither of us will care who talks first, or what we say.

Casey: OK sweet – but first, check this out, I can't believe I just remembered this. Remember Jamie, from my English class? Turns out Jamie has a friend with ADHD who is willing to share Adderall to study – but yesterday, there were a couple extra, so I bought them! I figured we could use them tonight!

Alex: Wait – Adderall? I mean, isn't that, like, a controlled substance?

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- Casey:** I don't even know what that means. It's just an Adderall. And you're welcome?!
- Alex:** Well thanks, I guess, but, like, if it's controlled, isn't that super illegal?
- Casey:** Whoa, easy there – I'm not trying to give you crack – it's just an Adderall! I use them to study sometimes, and one of my friends parties with them all the time. They're like uppers, but they're a medicine, so they're safer. Here (tries to hand a pill to Alex).
- Alex:** (steps back, not taking it) Are you sure about that? I mean, do you even know if we can take them with alcohol?
- Casey:** I don't know, I guess – that's what my friend does. I think alcohol's a downer, so I guess they balance out.
- Alex:** That doesn't really sound right.
- Casey:** Well then have it with a soda, geez. Just trust me, I promise I'm not trying to kill you! I'm just trying to have some fun!
- Alex:** I know, Casey, but this whole thing just feels shady to me. You know I'm trying to get into med school – I don't want to wake up tomorrow in the police station.
- Casey:** Are you kidding me? It is JUST an Adderall, Alex, don't be such a buzzkill! Everyone takes pills like this nowadays, we're not the first! Just loosen up, it'll be fun, I promise! Here (offers the pill to Alex again).

Discussion Questions

[**Note:** The facilitator may pick and choose from the following discussion questions. However, we do recommend always starting with discussion question #1.]

1) What would you do if you were Alex? Why would you take it, or why wouldn't you?

2) At one point, Alex says "... it's controlled, isn't that super illegal?" Is this true? What does it mean when something is a "controlled substance"? Is it really illegal to use a controlled substance without a legitimate prescription? After all, it is approved by the FDA.

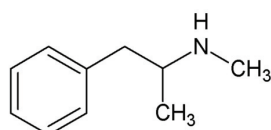
[**Notes:** According to federal law, prescription stimulants like Adderall, Ritalin, etc. are "Schedule II" controlled substances. This means that they do have an accepted medical use; however, obtaining them is further controlled because of their "high potential for abuse... [that] may lead to severe psychological or physical dependence."⁴ It is against federal law to manufacture, distribute, dispense, or possess a controlled substance without a legitimate prescription. There are also many state laws in place that prohibit these actions as well. Many colleges and universities also have anti-drug use provisions in their codes of student conduct. Possessing these medications without a prescription is considered illegal due to their potential for abuse, despite the fact that the controlled substance can be legally prescribed. In fact, it is against the law to possess any prescription drug – controlled or not – that was not prescribed for you.]

3) Alex wants to go to medical school. If caught with a controlled substance without a prescription, how could this affect that plan?

[**Notes:** If convicted of possessing a controlled substance without a prescription (which is a felony), this could drastically alter one's chances of entering a professional school and/or getting a job in the future. Students should recognize that what seems like an insignificant decision now could have significant consequences in the future.]

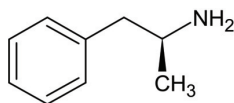
4) Casey says, “I’m not trying to give you crack – it’s just an Adderall... [it’s] a medicine, so it’s safer.” Is Casey right in assuming that prescription drugs are safer than illicit street drugs, even when they’re being abused? Why or why not? What are some other examples of prescription medications that are abused and could also be dangerous?

[Notes: Many students assume that because a medication is prescribed by a doctor and approved by the FDA, it is inherently safer than an illicit drug – even to abuse. However, prescription drugs are not necessarily inherently safer than illegal drugs. For example, consider the molecular structures of methamphetamine and the compounds which comprise Adderall (dextroamphetamine and amphetamine) **[Note:** These chemical structures are provided on the program handout.]:



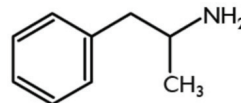
Methamphetamine

An Illegal Drug



Dextroamphetamine

The Main Ingredients in Adderall



Amphetamine

These drugs are chemically similar, and they also act similarly in the user’s body. The subtle changes in structure are enough to change medical and abuse potentials; but, when Adderall is misused (such as without appropriate monitoring by a healthcare professional or used in ways other than it is prescribed), the lines begin to blur and the “legal” and “illegal” substances may become more similar than you might think.

Stimulants are often abused on college campuses, but there are other prescription medications that also warrant mention with respect to the dangers of abuse. Certain prescription painkillers, called opioids (drugs like Vicodin®, OxyContin®, or Percocet®) are also controlled substances that could induce severe respiratory depression, addiction, or even death when misused. Sedatives like Valium® or Xanax® are also commonly abused, and carry similar dangers.]

5) Casey contends that alcohol is a “downer” and Adderall an “upper,” “... so I guess they balance out.” Is Casey right? Why or why not?

[Notes: Prescription medications can have potentially dangerous side effects, and the risk of these may increase when different substances are taken together. Drugs like Adderall can interact with other medications, alcohol, illegal drugs, other substances, or even food and drinks. For example, the “upper” effects of Adderall may be increased when taken with other substances with stimulant properties. Adderall may also counteract the effects of high blood pressure medications, may decrease the blood concentrations of certain anti-seizure medicines and may increase the risk of toxicity of certain antidepressants. A potentially significant reaction may occur when stimulants like Adderall are taken with a CNS depressant, or “downer”, such as alcohol, a prescription narcotic, or a prescription sedative. In this case, it’s been reported that stimulants may actually mask the body’s natural warning signals of over-sedation, which could lead to alcohol poisoning or dangerous respiratory depression.]

6) Casey feels that “Everyone takes pills like this nowadays...” How common is non-medical prescription stimulant use on campus? Is everyone really doing it? How could disparities between perception and reality be dangerous?

[Notes: In 2009, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) reported that the non-medical use of Adderall among 18-22 year olds was twice as high for full-time college students than for non-students. This is an alarming statistic, but unfortunately, few students are surprised to hear that college students are more prone to misusing these so-called “cognitive enhancers.” However, those same students may be surprised to learn that the reported rate of past year non-medical use of Adderall among college students was only 6.4% (as opposed to 3.0% for non-full-time students).⁵ A recent study of students at the Ohio State University found a vast disparity (approximately eight-fold) between self-reported non-medical use of prescription stimulants and perceptions of what other students were doing. This inaccurate assessment of the social norm on college campuses could create a feeling that “everyone is doing it”, when they actually are not. Students may use this perception as a rationalization for their experimentation with prescription stimulants, or it may provide an impetus to do so. Remember, studies have found that the actual self-reported, non-medical use of prescription stimulants actually remains relatively low.]

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References:

- 1 www.talkaboutrx.org/college_resource_kit.jsp
- 2 Loe, Meika (2008). The Prescription of a New Generation, Contexts, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 46-49.
- 3 http://pi.shirecontent.com/PI/PDFs/AdderallXR_USA_ENG.PDF
- 4 <http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/21cfr/21usc/812.htm>
- 5 <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/2k9/adderall/adderall.pdf>

