

# THE CENTER FOR BUSINESS & SOCIETY

*Cases in Business & Society*

## The Adderall Edge

By Jessica Pierce

Jamie and her boyfriend, Greg, were on the couch at Greg's apartment, studying side by side. It was well into Jamie's first semester at the University's prestigious School of Business, and finals were just two weeks away, including the notorious end-of-term exam in Mr. Stockwell's finance class. She had held things together so far, but just barely. She was exhausted from several consecutive 3:00 a.m. study sessions trying to complete a strategy project. Her intramural soccer team had switched to three practices a week, to prepare for an upcoming game. Tomorrow she had to turn in a semester paper for her strategy class, and had no idea how it would get done—she had three pages written, out of a required ten. The past week, she had felt herself beginning to come unraveled around the edges. Tonight felt even worse. She had a tight, panicky feeling in her chest, and found it hard to concentrate on her paper—thoughts of how much she still had to accomplish, in far too little time, kept forcing their way into her head.

Greg looked up from his laptop and noticed tears in Jamie's eyes. "I just don't think I can do this anymore," she said. "I'm exhausted, but I have to keep going."

"I've got something for you," he replied. He went into his bathroom and came out carrying an orange prescription bottle. "I can't complete large projects without these," he said, as he snapped open the lid and poured out small blue pill. "20 milligrams and you'll be good to go."

Jamie already knew what the blue pill was. A friend of hers had a prescription for Adderall and had relied on it to get through all of her final exams. Jamie had also heard people around school talking about the Adderall buzz. She had always been curious to try Adderall—but never curious enough. She felt awkward asking her friend to share a medication. But now, here it was, ready for the taking. With a hint of apprehension, she took the pill from Greg's palm and gulped it down with cold coffee.

### Background

Adderall, the brand name for dextroamphetamine, belongs to a class of prescription amphetamines called analeptics, which used to treat attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Analeptics stimulate the central nervous system and increase the amount of dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain; they also increase heart rate and blood pressure and decrease appetite. According to students who take Adderall as a study aid, the drug gives them incredible concentration and stamina. It gets them absolutely focused, and removes the need for sleep or food. With Adderall, some students can pull an all-nighter and then sail through a final exam the next morning, still feeling sharp as a razor.

The use of analeptics on college campuses appears to be widespread. Up to one-fifth of all students surveyed admitted to using Adderall or Ritalin to study for exams or write papers. One out of every three students

with a prescription for Adderall was asked by friends to share his or her medication (New York University, 2005). No data have been collected on the prevalence of Adderall abuse in graduate programs, such as business schools or medical schools.

The most serious concern about the off-label use of Adderall is safety. As with all medications, Adderall dosage is carefully individualized. People without a prescription can only guess at what dosage will be safe. Adderall may react with other medications—such as tricyclic antidepressants, antacids, and diuretics—with potentially serious side effects. Amphetamines in general have a high potential for abuse, according to information sheets published by the FDA. Extended use of amphetamines can lead to addiction, and can create a body tolerance, so that increased doses will be required to achieve the desired effect. Some physicians worry even more about psychological dependence. Students can become "addicted" to using drugs to get their work done, and may come to believe that they cannot perform well without phar-



Think Broadly.  
Act Boldly.

maceutical aid. They also may fail to develop other kinds of coping mechanisms for dealing with stress and time pressures, skills that they will need later in life.

Off-label use of Adderall also raises ethical questions. Though it is unlikely that drug enforcement officers will raid the college library, Adderall abuse is nevertheless illegal. Though perhaps a “small” infraction, illegal use of the drug shows a general disregard for the law, and may set a bad precedent, making other seemingly small infractions easy to justify. How to get the pills, if you don’t have a prescription? You might ask a friend to illegally share their medication. You might find someone selling the drug illegally on campus (someone who may have mislead their physician into giving them more medication than they actually take, so that they can sell half at a profit), or you may go so far as to convince a doctor that you have the symptoms of ADD or ADHD and need the medication to function in school. There is no honest way.

It could be said that the use of Adderall as a study aid is form of cheating because it gives students an unfair edge over the rest of their colleagues—the Adderall-enhanced student has an “unnatural” degree of concentration and stamina. Others would argue that performance enhancers—whether in school or sports—are simply the enhancement of a person’s natural talents, and thus fair. The line between “natural” and “unnatural” is too blurry to be useful; caffeine, Red Bull, and Ginkgo Biloba are also performance enhancers, but few would consider these unethical. Many consider Adderall simply another substance that people may find useful.

Finally, those who genuinely suffer from ADD or ADHD are frustrated by the use of Adderall by “normal” students. ADD and ADHD are classified as learning disabilities, and the use of Adderall by students with these disabilities makes them able to function fairly normally in a college setting. When “normal” people abuse Adderall, they gain an extra edge; they become super-human, placing students with ADD or ADHD at a disadvantage that they cannot repair.

Side Note: Adderall is not the only drug that appeals to ambitious people. Modafinil, which is licensed for treatment of narcolepsy and other sleep disorders, has been used as a so-called “lifestyle” drug, a high-powered ‘pick-me-up’. A new drug being developed as a potential treatment for Alzheimer’s—called CX717—also appears to counter the effects of sleep deprivation, and may also provide an added “cognitive boost.” Workaholics may soon be able to live on even less sleep.

### Discussion Questions

1. Would you call it cheating to use Adderall for the purpose of enhancing academic performance? Would the use of Adderall by an MBA student be unethical?
2. Is there a parallel to sports doping? Consider the comparison carefully.
3. Consider the “slippery slope” argument: the use of Adderall to do well in school will lead to other forms of dishonesty in a person’s career.
4. Should Jamie take the pill? And, should she dump her pill-pusher boyfriend?

### References

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