

adhd and self-medication psychology

Navigating the complexities of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often involves understanding the intricate relationship between the condition and behaviors aimed at managing its symptoms. This article delves into the psychology behind ADHD and self-medication, exploring how individuals with ADHD may turn to various substances or activities to alleviate their challenges. We will examine common self-medicating strategies, the psychological motivations driving these choices, and the potential consequences. Furthermore, we will discuss evidence-based approaches to managing ADHD that reduce the need for self-medication, offering a comprehensive overview for those seeking better understanding and support. This exploration aims to shed light on a critical aspect of living with ADHD and highlight pathways toward healthier coping mechanisms.

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Understanding ADHD and Self-Medication: A Psychological Perspective

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that significantly impacts an individual's ability to regulate attention, manage impulsivity, and control activity levels. For many individuals living with undiagnosed or inadequately treated ADHD, the persistent challenges associated with these core symptoms can lead to a natural inclination towards self-medication. This drive stems from a fundamental psychological need to find relief from the daily struggles that ADHD presents. The psychology of ADHD and self-medication is a complex interplay of biological predispositions, environmental influences, and individual coping mechanisms developed over time. Understanding this intricate relationship is crucial for effective management and support.

ADHD and the Urge to Self-Medicate: The Underlying Psychology

The internal experience of living with ADHD is often characterized by a sense of chaos, frustration, and a feeling of being out of sync with the world. Individuals may struggle with focus, leading to difficulties in academic, professional, and social settings. The impulsivity associated with ADHD can result in regrettable actions, while hyperactivity can lead to restlessness and an inability to settle. These persistent difficulties can be emotionally taxing, contributing to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and anxiety. The underlying psychology driving the urge to self-medicate in ADHD is a deeply ingrained desire to regain a sense of control, to achieve a semblance of normalcy, and to alleviate the distressing symptoms that permeate daily life.

This psychological impetus to self-medicate arises from the brain's natural reward systems and the way ADHD affects neurotransmitter activity, particularly dopamine and norepinephrine. These neurotransmitters are crucial for attention, motivation, and reward processing. When these systems are not functioning optimally, as is often the case in ADHD, individuals may seek external stimuli that can artificially boost these neurotransmitter levels, providing temporary relief and a sense of reward.

The Neurobiological Basis of Self-Medication

Research suggests that individuals with ADHD may have dysregulation in their dopaminergic and noradrenergic systems. These neurotransmitters play a vital role in executive functions, including attention, impulse control, and working memory. The symptoms of ADHD, such as inattention and hyperactivity, can be interpreted as a consequence of these neurobiological differences. Self-medication, whether through substances or behaviors, can be an unconscious attempt to self-regulate these neurochemical imbalances. For instance, stimulants, which are often prescribed for ADHD, work by increasing the availability of dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain, thereby improving focus and reducing impulsivity. When individuals with ADHD engage in self-medication, they are often, albeit unknowingly, trying to replicate these effects.

Emotional and Psychological Impact of Untreated ADHD

The constant challenges presented by ADHD can lead to a cascade of negative emotional and psychological consequences. Individuals may experience chronic frustration from unfinished tasks, social misunderstandings, and a feeling of not living up to their potential. This can foster a sense of shame and isolation. Emotional dysregulation, a common comorbidity with ADHD, further complicates matters. Individuals may struggle to manage their emotions, leading to mood swings, irritability, and heightened sensitivity to rejection. This internal turmoil creates a strong psychological motivation to seek any means of relief, making self-medication a tempting, albeit often detrimental, avenue.

Common Forms of Self-Medication in ADHD

The ways in which individuals with ADHD self-medicate are diverse, ranging from the use of substances to engagement in specific behaviors or dietary practices. These methods are typically adopted to counteract the bothersome symptoms of ADHD, such as difficulty concentrating, restlessness, impulsivity, and emotional reactivity. Understanding these common forms is the first step in recognizing the pattern and seeking more effective, healthier strategies.

Substance Use as a Coping Mechanism

- **Stimulant Substances:** Caffeine is perhaps the most ubiquitous self-medicating substance. Many individuals with ADHD report that coffee or energy drinks help them focus and feel more alert, mimicking the effects of prescribed stimulant medications.
- **Nicotine:** Smoking cigarettes is also prevalent among individuals with ADHD. Nicotine can act as a mild stimulant, improving attention and reducing restlessness for some. However, this comes with significant health risks.

- **Alcohol:** While alcohol is a depressant, some individuals with ADHD may use it to calm their racing thoughts, reduce anxiety, or self-soothe after a day of feeling overwhelmed. However, alcohol can exacerbate ADHD symptoms like impulsivity and poor judgment.
- **Illicit Drugs:** Unfortunately, some individuals may turn to illicit stimulants like amphetamines or cocaine in an attempt to achieve greater focus and a sense of control, often leading to addiction and severe health consequences.

Behavioral Self-Medication Strategies

Beyond substances, individuals with ADHD often engage in certain behaviors to self-regulate their attention, energy levels, or emotional states. These behaviors, while sometimes providing temporary relief, can become maladaptive patterns.

- **Excessive Gaming or Internet Use:** The interactive and stimulating nature of video games and the internet can provide a dopamine hit and a sense of accomplishment, helping to combat boredom and provide focus for some individuals with ADHD. However, this can easily lead to excessive use and neglect of other responsibilities.
- **Compulsive Shopping or Spending:** The impulsive nature of ADHD can manifest in compulsive shopping, where the act of acquiring new items provides a temporary thrill and distraction from underlying discomfort.
- **Overeating or Binge Eating:** Food can be used as a form of self-soothing or a way to cope with emotional distress. Sugary and high-fat foods can provide a temporary mood boost due to their effect on dopamine release.
- **High-Risk Behaviors:** For some, engaging in thrill-seeking or risky activities can provide a rush of adrenaline that helps to stimulate their nervous system and combat feelings of boredom or under-arousal. This can include extreme sports, reckless driving, or engaging in dangerous social interactions.
- **Hyperfocusing on Specific Interests:** While hyperfocus can be a strength of ADHD, it can also be used as a self-medicating strategy. By deeply immersing themselves in a highly engaging activity, individuals can temporarily escape the difficulties of managing their attention in other areas of life.

Dietary and Nutritional Approaches

Some individuals with ADHD explore dietary changes or nutritional supplements in an attempt to manage their symptoms. While a balanced diet is crucial for overall well-being, these approaches can sometimes be used as a form of self-medication, driven by the hope of finding a natural solution.

- **Elimination Diets:** Some theories suggest that certain food additives or allergens might exacerbate ADHD symptoms. Individuals may try eliminating specific foods, such as gluten, dairy, or artificial colors, hoping for symptom improvement.
- **Supplementation:** Omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins (like B vitamins and Vitamin D), and minerals (like zinc and magnesium) are often explored as potential natural remedies for ADHD. While some may offer general health benefits, their efficacy for directly treating ADHD symptoms varies greatly, and they should not replace evidence-based treatments.
- **High-Protein Diets:** Some individuals find that increasing protein intake, especially at breakfast, helps to stabilize blood sugar levels and improve focus throughout the day. This is often because protein has a less dramatic impact on blood sugar compared to carbohydrates, leading to more sustained energy and concentration.

Psychological Drivers of ADHD Self-Medication

The decision to self-medicate, whether consciously or unconsciously, is driven by a complex set of psychological needs and desires stemming from the lived experience of ADHD. These drivers are rooted in the fundamental challenges of managing core ADHD symptoms and the emotional toll they take.

Seeking Focus and Regulation

One of the most significant psychological drivers for self-medication in ADHD is the persistent struggle with focus and attention. Individuals with ADHD often experience an internal state of cognitive restlessness, making it difficult to sustain attention on tasks that are not inherently stimulating. Self-medicating behaviors, such as consuming caffeine or engaging in high-intensity activities, are often an attempt to artificially boost alertness and bring the brain to a more optimal level of arousal where concentration becomes possible. This desire for cognitive control and the ability to direct one's attention is a primary motivator for seeking external regulation.

Managing Emotional Dysregulation

Emotional dysregulation is a hallmark of ADHD for many individuals. This can manifest as heightened emotional reactivity, mood swings, difficulty managing frustration, and an increased sensitivity to rejection. The psychological distress caused by these emotional fluctuations can be profound. Self-medicating activities, like using substances to numb feelings, engaging in comfort eating, or seeking distraction through entertainment, are often employed as coping mechanisms to dampen overwhelming emotions, reduce anxiety, or find a sense of calm amidst internal emotional turbulence. The aim is to achieve emotional stability, even if the methods used are ultimately detrimental.

Coping with Social Anxiety and Rejection

The challenges with social cues, impulsivity in interactions, and difficulties in maintaining consistent relationships can lead to significant social anxiety and a fear of rejection in individuals with ADHD. Past experiences of being misunderstood, criticized, or ostracized can create a deep-seated psychological vulnerability. Self-medication can be an attempt to self-anesthetize against the anticipated pain of social interaction, or to boost confidence to engage socially. For example, some might drink alcohol before social events to lower inhibitions, or use substances to cope with the aftermath of perceived social failures. This is a way to psychologically shield oneself from perceived or actual social threats.

The Role of Reward Pathways

ADHD is associated with differences in the brain's reward pathways, particularly those involving dopamine. Individuals with ADHD often experience a delay in the rewarding effects of activities, leading to a need for more intense or frequent stimulation to achieve a similar level of satisfaction. This can make them more susceptible to seeking out novel, exciting, or immediately gratifying experiences. Self-medicating behaviors that provide quick bursts of pleasure or reward, such as the thrill of gambling, the intense focus of gaming, or the immediate mood lift from certain substances, can hijack these reward pathways. This creates a cycle where the brain becomes accustomed to these artificial rewards, reinforcing the self-medicating behavior as a way to feel "normal" or to experience pleasure.

Risks and Consequences of ADHD Self-Medication

While self-medication may offer temporary relief from the symptoms of ADHD, it often carries significant risks and can lead to a cascade of negative consequences that far outweigh any perceived benefits. Understanding these dangers is crucial for individuals to recognize the limitations of these coping strategies and to seek more sustainable and healthier alternatives.

Exacerbation of ADHD Symptoms

Ironically, many self-medicating strategies can actually worsen the core symptoms of ADHD in the long run. For instance, while caffeine might provide a temporary boost in focus, excessive consumption can lead to increased anxiety, restlessness, and sleep disturbances, all of which can impair cognitive function and exacerbate inattentiveness. Similarly, alcohol and certain illicit drugs can impair judgment, memory, and impulse control, directly undermining the executive functions that are already compromised in ADHD. These substances can also interfere with the effectiveness of prescribed ADHD medications if taken concurrently, creating a complex and often counterproductive interaction.

Development of Addiction and Dependence

Individuals with ADHD are at a higher risk for developing substance use disorders and addictive behaviors. This increased vulnerability is linked to the underlying neurobiological differences in reward pathways and the psychological drive to self-regulate. When individuals repeatedly turn to substances or addictive behaviors to manage their ADHD symptoms, they can develop physical and psychological dependence. This dependence creates a new set of problems that are independent of ADHD, requiring separate treatment and often complicating the management of the primary condition. The cycle of addiction can be particularly devastating, leading to severe health, financial, and social consequences.

Impact on Mental and Physical Health

The long-term consequences of self-medication on mental and physical health can be severe. Substance abuse is linked to a wide range of physical health problems, including cardiovascular issues, liver damage, respiratory problems, and weakened immune systems. Mentally, self-medication can lead to or worsen co-occurring mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, and even psychosis. The emotional toll of managing addiction on top of ADHD can lead to increased feelings of hopelessness, shame, and isolation, further hindering an individual's ability to function and thrive. The psychological distress associated with these complications can create a vicious cycle.

Interpersonal and Social Implications

Self-medication patterns can also have profound negative impacts on an individual's relationships and social functioning. Impaired judgment, erratic behavior, and the demands of addiction can strain relationships with family, friends, and partners. Individuals may withdraw from social activities, experience job loss or academic failure due to their substance use, and alienate themselves from supportive networks. This social isolation further compounds the psychological distress and can reinforce the belief that self-medication is the only way to cope, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of difficulties.

Evidence-Based Alternatives to Self-Medication for ADHD

Fortunately, effective, evidence-based strategies exist to help individuals with ADHD manage their symptoms without resorting to detrimental self-medication. These approaches focus on addressing the root causes of ADHD and equipping individuals with healthy coping mechanisms, fostering long-term well-being and improved functioning.

Formal ADHD Treatment Approaches

- **Medication Management:** Stimulant and non-stimulant medications prescribed by a qualified healthcare professional are the most well-researched and effective treatments for ADHD. These medications work by regulating neurotransmitter levels, improving focus, reducing impulsivity, and managing hyperactivity. Proper diagnosis and ongoing management by a physician are crucial to ensure efficacy and minimize side effects.
- **Therapeutic Interventions:** Various forms of therapy can provide significant support. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) helps individuals identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviors associated with ADHD. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) can be beneficial for managing emotional dysregulation and impulsivity.

Behavioral Therapies and Coaching

Behavioral therapies and ADHD coaching are invaluable for developing practical skills and strategies to navigate daily life with ADHD. These approaches are highly personalized and focus on addressing specific challenges.

- **ADHD Coaching:** Coaches work with individuals to set goals, develop organizational systems, improve time management, and build effective coping strategies. They provide accountability, encouragement, and practical tools tailored to the individual's needs.
- **Parent Training (for children):** For parents of children with ADHD, parent training programs offer strategies for managing behavior, establishing routines, and creating a supportive home environment.
- **Marital and Family Therapy:** ADHD can impact family dynamics. Therapy can help improve communication, reduce conflict, and build understanding among family members.

Mindfulness and Meditation Practices

Mindfulness and meditation techniques are increasingly recognized for their benefits in managing ADHD symptoms. These practices can help improve focus, reduce impulsivity, and enhance emotional regulation.

- **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR):** MBSR programs teach individuals to cultivate present-moment awareness without judgment, which can help individuals with ADHD become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, and respond to them more intentionally rather than reactively.

- **Guided Meditation:** Regular meditation practice, even for short durations, can train the brain to focus, reduce mind-wandering, and promote a sense of calm.
- **Body Scan Meditations:** These exercises help individuals connect with their physical sensations, which can be grounding and help manage restlessness.

Lifestyle Modifications for ADHD Management

Integrating healthy lifestyle habits can significantly support ADHD management and reduce the reliance on self-medication. These modifications focus on creating a stable and supportive environment.

- **Regular Exercise:** Physical activity is crucial for individuals with ADHD. Exercise releases endorphins, improves mood, boosts focus, and helps manage hyperactivity and restlessness. Aerobic exercise, in particular, has been shown to have a positive impact on executive functions.
- **Balanced Diet:** A nutritious diet rich in whole foods, lean proteins, and healthy fats can help stabilize blood sugar levels and improve overall cognitive function. Limiting processed foods, excessive sugar, and artificial additives is often recommended.
- **Consistent Sleep Schedule:** Establishing a regular sleep schedule is vital, as sleep deprivation can significantly worsen ADHD symptoms. Creating a calming bedtime routine and ensuring a conducive sleep environment can improve sleep quality.
- **Organizational Strategies:** Implementing organizational systems, such as using planners, to-do lists, timers, and designated spaces for items, can help manage the executive function challenges associated with ADHD and reduce feelings of overwhelm.

Conclusion: Navigating ADHD and Self-Medication Psychology

The interplay between ADHD and self-medication psychology is a critical area of understanding for individuals, families, and healthcare professionals. The innate difficulties in attention, impulse control, and emotional regulation that characterize ADHD often drive individuals toward various forms of self-medication in a bid to find relief and achieve a sense of normalcy. From substance use like caffeine and nicotine to behavioral patterns such as excessive gaming or overeating, these self-soothing attempts, while sometimes providing temporary respite, frequently lead to a host of detrimental consequences. These risks include the exacerbation of ADHD symptoms, the development of addiction and dependence, negative impacts on mental and physical health, and strain on interpersonal relationships. Recognizing the

underlying psychological drivers, such as the pursuit of focus, emotional regulation, and coping with social anxieties, is key to addressing this complex dynamic. Ultimately, the most effective path forward involves embracing evidence-based treatments and lifestyle modifications, including medication management, behavioral therapies, mindfulness practices, and consistent healthy habits, to foster sustainable well-being and manage ADHD effectively, thereby minimizing the need for self-medication.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does 'self-medication' mean in the context of ADHD?

Self-medication in ADHD refers to individuals with undiagnosed or inadequately treated ADHD using substances (like alcohol, cannabis, nicotine) or engaging in certain behaviors (like excessive gaming, binge eating, risky activities) to manage their ADHD symptoms, such as inattention, impulsivity, or hyperactivity.

Why do people with ADHD tend to self-medicate?

Individuals with ADHD may self-medicate to temporarily alleviate the distressing symptoms of their condition. For example, stimulants might provide a sense of calm, while substances that affect dopamine can offer a brief mood boost or increase focus, even if not in a healthy or sustainable way.

What are common substances or behaviors people with ADHD use for self-medication?

Commonly self-medicated substances include alcohol, cannabis, nicotine (cigarettes/vapes), caffeine, and sometimes illicit stimulants. Behaviors can include excessive screen time (gaming, social media), disordered eating patterns (binge eating), and engaging in thrill-seeking activities.

What are the psychological reasons behind ADHD self-medication?

Psychologically, self-medication often stems from a desire to reduce internal discomfort, such as boredom, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, or the cognitive burden of executive dysfunction. It can also be an attempt to self-soothe or to achieve a level of stimulation that feels 'normal'.

Is self-medication with substances an effective long-term strategy for ADHD?

No, self-medication with substances is generally not an effective or healthy long-term strategy for ADHD. While it might offer temporary relief, it often leads to addiction, worsening of existing symptoms, new mental health problems, and negative impacts on physical health and life functioning.

How does self-medication relate to the concept of dopamine deficiency in ADHD?

ADHD is associated with dysregulation in the dopamine system. Many self-medicating substances (like stimulants, nicotine, alcohol) increase dopamine levels temporarily, providing a reinforcing effect. This can create a cycle where individuals turn to these substances to feel 'balanced' or capable.

What are the risks of self-medicating ADHD with alcohol or cannabis?

Risks include developing alcohol or cannabis use disorders, exacerbating ADHD symptoms (especially impulsivity and inattention), impairing judgment, leading to risky behaviors, increasing the likelihood of other substance abuse, and negatively impacting mood, sleep, and cognitive function.

How can professional treatment for ADHD help prevent or address self-medication?

Proper diagnosis and evidence-based treatment (like medication, therapy, coaching) address the root causes of ADHD symptoms, reducing the need for self-medication. Therapies like CBT and DBT can teach coping skills for emotional regulation and impulsivity, while medication can normalize neurotransmitter levels.

What psychological approaches are used to help individuals stop self-medicating for ADHD?

Therapeutic approaches include Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to challenge maladaptive thought patterns and develop coping strategies, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) for emotional regulation and distress tolerance, Motivational Interviewing to foster intrinsic motivation for change, and Co-occurring Disorders treatment if substance use is present.

What are signs that someone with ADHD might be self-medicating inappropriately?

Signs include consistent use of substances to manage focus or mood, withdrawal symptoms when not using, increasing tolerance, prioritizing substance use over responsibilities, engaging in risky behaviors while under the influence, or reporting that their ADHD symptoms worsen without the substance.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to ADHD and self-medication psychology, with short descriptions:

1. **Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood Through Adulthood**
This foundational book offers a comprehensive overview of ADHD, covering its symptoms across the lifespan and its impact on various aspects of life. It explores how individuals with ADHD might engage in self-medication behaviors,

such as seeking intense stimulation or using substances, to manage their symptoms. The authors provide practical strategies for diagnosis, treatment, and developing coping mechanisms for both individuals and their families.

2. The Addicted Brain: Why You Can't Stop—and What to Do About It

While not exclusively about ADHD, this book delves into the neurobiological underpinnings of addiction, which are highly relevant to understanding self-medication in the context of ADHD. It explains how the brain's reward system can be hijacked by addictive substances or behaviors. The book offers insights into the genetic and environmental factors that contribute to addiction and outlines pathways to recovery.

3. Drug-Induced Depression: Finding Your Way Back to Mental Wellness

This title addresses the complex relationship between substance use and mental health disorders, including how substances might be used to self-medicate underlying conditions like ADHD, potentially leading to further depression. It explores the cyclical nature of substance abuse and mood disorders. The book aims to guide readers toward understanding these connections and finding effective treatments for both.

4. Mind Wide Open: Your Neurological Roadmap to a Better Life

This book explores the exciting advancements in neuroscience and how a deeper understanding of brain function can lead to improved mental well-being. It touches upon various brain-related conditions, including ADHD, and discusses how individuals might seek external stimuli or substances to regulate their neurological states. The author provides accessible explanations of brain mechanisms and their implications for self-regulation.

5. ADHD and the Art of Not Getting It Wrong: A Neurodivergent Perspective on the ADHD Experience

This book offers a more nuanced and personal exploration of living with ADHD, often from the perspective of someone who has experienced it firsthand. It can shed light on the internal struggles and coping strategies individuals develop, including those that might be considered self-medication, as they navigate a world not always designed for their neurotype. The book emphasizes acceptance and finding personalized ways to thrive.

6. The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business

Understanding the formation and modification of habits is crucial for addressing self-medication behaviors. This book provides a scientific framework for understanding how habits are formed in the brain, and how they can be changed. It's highly relevant for individuals with ADHD who may develop maladaptive habits as a way to cope with their symptoms, offering a path to re-engineer these patterns.

7. Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Mind-Altering Experience

This title examines the powerful effects of music on the brain, including its ability to alter mood, focus, and emotional states. For individuals with ADHD, music can be a significant form of self-regulation or self-medication, providing much-needed stimulation or calming effects. The book explores the neurological mechanisms behind these experiences and their potential therapeutic applications.

8. Brain Lock: Free Yourself from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

While focused on OCD, the principles of managing intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors discussed in this book can be relevant to understanding the self-soothing or distraction techniques individuals with ADHD might employ. These can sometimes manifest as repetitive behaviors or a reliance on external stimuli, akin to self-medication. The book offers practical

strategies for gaining control over unwanted mental patterns.

9. The Impulsive Generation: Understanding and Treating ADHD in Adults

This book specifically addresses the challenges of ADHD in adulthood, a period where self-medication strategies might become more entrenched or complex. It explores the various ways adult ADHD manifests and how individuals may use substances, excessive engagement in activities, or other methods to manage their impulsivity, inattention, and hyperactivity. The book provides guidance on seeking professional help and developing healthier coping mechanisms.

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