Adolescents and Ecstasy Use – An Update

Ecstasy is a man-made drug with psychoactive properties, having both stimulant and psychedelic effects. The effects include an increase in energy and emotional warmth as well as distortions in perception and time. It is chemically similar to methamphetamines (NIDA InfoFacts; NIDA Research Report, 2006).

Researchers at Columbia University have recently completed a study of trends from 1999 through 2008 in ecstasy use among adolescents in the United States (Wu et al., 2010). They examined use in adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 and related it to a number of demographic variables including age, gender, and ethnic background. Adolescents were asked to report on their lifetime use. Data were collected in large-scale representative surveys, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) and, in the earlier years, the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA).

The researchers reported the following trends:

- There was a consistent gender difference in use across time, with girls reporting higher use than boys. This effect was significant in 6 of the 10 years. This difference persisted even when other background variables were controlled.
- Overall use increased from 1.86% in 1999 to 3.37% in 2002. Reports of lifetime use ranged from 1.54% to 2.33% between 2003 and 2008.
- When two age groups were compared (12-15 years and 16-17 years), the older groups consistently reported higher use.
- White adolescents were most likely to report ecstasy use and African-American youth were least likely.
- There were no significant effects of income on use, but, in the early years, use was higher in the higher income groups while, in the later years, use was higher in the lower income groups.
The authors regard the gender difference as their major finding. Additional analyses showed that the difference in the younger adolescent group has become greater over time. In 1999, the girls in the younger group were 1.3 times more likely to have used ecstasy than boys in the younger group; in 2008 the girls in the younger group were 2.5 times more likely to have used than the boys. The gender difference early in adolescence is consistent with other samples of adolescents of the same age; by adulthood, studies suggest that there is more male than female ecstasy usage. According to the researchers, these results in combination with findings that some negative health effects related to ecstasy may be stronger in women, suggest that interventions should be targeted toward younger adolescent girls.

References.


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