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Superwoman syndrome fuels pill-pop culture

Overwhelmed overachievers turn to prescription drugs for an edge



Laurie Besden, a Philadelphia-area attorney, became addicted to prescription painkillers while studying for the bar exam in 1999. She's been clean for six years.

Ryan Donnell / for msnbc.com

By **Karen Asp**

msnbc.com contributor
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Popping a couple of pain pills helped Laurie J. Besden study night after night. They helped her pass the Pennsylvania bar exam. They helped her get more done in a day than many of her colleagues. Then they helped her land in jail.

Besden doesn't seem like any drug addict you'd picture. She's smart, motivated — and an overachiever. But she's one of an alarming number of women who have turned to prescription pills to get ahead — or even just to keep up.

Almost 6 percent of American women, that's 7.5

million adult women, report using prescription medicines for a boost of energy, a dose of calm or other non-medical reasons, according to the latest numbers from the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"Many may not consider what they're doing abuse because they're using a prescribed drug," says Susan R.B. Weiss, chief of NIDA's Science Policy Branch. "Many of these medications are being taken as performance-enhancers."

While street drug use has been declining in recent years, prescription drug abuse has been up since the 1990s.

The trend seems to be partly driven by more and more women popping pills. While men make up the majority of abusers of street drugs, including meth, cocaine and heroin, women are just as likely to abuse prescription pills as men.

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Studies show that women are more likely — in some cases, 55 percent more likely — to be prescribed an abusable prescription drug, especially narcotics and anti-anxiety drugs.

"Not surprisingly, availability increases abuse patterns," Weiss says.

This alarms some drug abuse experts because women also seem to be more vulnerable to addiction to these types of drugs once they start taking them.

Perfection through pharmaceuticals?

To blame may be what some are calling the superwoman syndrome. Overworked, overwhelmed and overscheduled women juggling families, friends and careers are turning to stimulants, painkillers and anti-anxiety meds to help launch them through endless to-do lists.

"Women load their lives with so much that they get in over their heads, and some turn to prescription pills to cope," says Talia Witkowski, a psychologist in Los Angeles.

Witkowski, 30, began abusing her prescription attention deficit hyperactivity disorder drugs in high school, and has been clean for three years.

"For many women, even those whom you would never suspect, pills offer an escape," she says. But what many women don't realize is that they are conducting a dangerous experiment on their health and their mind.

Start of a secret addiction

After graduating from the Dickinson School of Law at Pennsylvania State University in 1999, Laurie Besden felt overwhelmed by the pressure to pass the bar. So she stole a box of Vicoprofen, which contains the narcotic painkiller hydrocodone, from

her ex-boyfriend's father's house and popped two pills. She had heard the medication could offer a burst of energy and ability to focus.

"I had energy to study for 12 hours and then clean the house like a superwoman," recalls the 35-year-old from Plymouth Meeting, Pa. Eventually, her two-a-day habit grew to 20 a day.

After she passed the bar, she tried to quit, but couldn't. "If I didn't take them, I was going to be sick," she says. "I needed the pills to get out of bed so my heart wouldn't go into palpitations."

Then she started a prestigious — and demanding — clerkship, and realized she was completely dependent on her secret stash of pills to get through the day.

For years, she hid this addiction from her friends and family. She no longer even tried to imagine life without her little helpers. Then her source — a doctor who prescribed these pills for any phony condition — had his medical license revoked. Besden figured out how to call in her own prescriptions, using false names and

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impersonating doctors.

In 2002, she was arrested for the first of what would be five times before she was convicted in 2004 for prescription fraud and jailed for almost a year.

Pills all around

Abuse of prescription drugs has risen right along with increases in the number of prescriptions for stimulants and painkillers seen since the early '90s, experts note. According to IMS Health, a research firm that tracks prescription use, the use of stimulants has nearly tripled over the past decade.

And as the drugs have become more commonplace, our attitude has become increasingly cavalier. After all, if a kid can be given an amphetamine for ADHD, couldn't Mom benefit from a little extra focus, too?

Women aren't just abusing their own prescriptions; they're also dipping into friends' supplies. In one survey, 29 percent of U.S. women admitted to sharing or borrowing somebody else's prescription drugs in their lifetime. This study, published in the *Journal of Women's Health*, found the rate of borrowing was highest among women ages 18 to 44.

That stat is backed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which found that the main source of prescription drugs among non-medical users — a whopping 56 percent — was free drugs from friends and family.

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