

Affective dysregulation predicts incident nonmedical prescription analgesic use among college students

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Nonmedical use of prescription analgesics (NPA) is a pervasive and growing public health concern, resulting in an unprecedented number of overdose deaths in the U.S. annually.¹ While many studies have focused on correlates of NPA among samples of individuals receiving addiction treatment, fewer have attempted to understand individual-level characteristics that might place a person at risk for starting to engage in NPA. This line of research is important because it can inform about the risk factors that should be the targets of preventive interventions.

Numerous individual-level risk factors have been identified that predict a general propensity to use drugs, but this study aimed to identify the variables that might predict initiation of NPA in particular. Researchers hypothesized that high levels of affective dysregulation, or the inability to regulate one's emotional state, would be related to initiating NPA. Prior research has shown that anxiety and depression are related to NPA among college students.² Adolescents and young adults have also reported self-treatment for anxiety, psychological trauma, and poor emotional control as motive for NPA.^{3,4} NPA is more common among young adults than older adults.^{5,6}

Data were taken from a longitudinal prospective study of 1,253 college students. The sample was drawn from incoming first year students at one large public university in the mid-Atlantic region. Students were interviewed during their first year of college (Year 1) and then completed follow-up assessments annually. The current study analyzed data from 929 college students who were NPA naïve at Year 1. At Year 3, 9.4% of the sample had started to engage in NPA. The vast majority of students who engaged in NPA (91.9%) were using another illicit drug or prescription drug nonmedically.

The study results showed that conduct problems, affective dysregulation, depressive symptoms, and psychological distress predicted starting to engage in NPA. More specifically, affective dysregulation and depression distinguished individuals who engage in NPA from individuals who use other types of drugs and those who do not use drugs at all. In contrast, conduct problems did not differentiate individuals who engaged in NPA from individuals who use other drugs. These associations suggest that an inability to regulate and manage one's emotional state might be an important predictor of NPA.

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers

Practice and Policy Suggestions: Given the adverse consequences of NPA, more emphasis should be placed on preventing initiation of drug use in general, and NPA in particular. The results of this study highlight a potentially novel



intervention target—high levels of affective dysregulation. College is an opportune time to intervene with students who might be at risk for drug use or starting to escalate their drug use. Screening should be comprehensive and include individual-level characteristics that are associated with an increased propensity for drug use. Further research is necessary to replicate these findings and design effective prevention efforts to reduce drug use among young adults.

References:

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- ⁶ Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2015). Behavioral health trends in the United States: Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Rockville, MD. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-FRR1-2014/NSDUH-FRR1-2014.htm>.

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About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first-time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.^{1,2} Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit www.cls.umd.edu or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland School of Public Health at aarria@umd.edu.

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This research brief was prepared by Maya Deane-Polyak.

