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'Just Say No' Wins Few Points With Ravers

By MARSHA ROSENBAUM

The big news out of a recent key study measuring trends in high school drug use was that while the use of all illegal substances had leveled off last year, regular Ecstasy use among 12th-graders had increased significantly—up from 5.6% in 1999 to 8.2% in 2000. A survey released in November by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America showed a similar pattern.

This information culminates a year of news about Ecstasy, also known by its chemical name, MDMA. Nearly 1,000 news reports told of increased supply and demand, as indicated by Drug Enforcement Administration and Customs seizures, as well as arrests of distributors associated with organized crime.

There were reports of adverse reactions to the drug, even fatalities. Emergency-room visits increased as several "ravers" attending huge, all-night dance parties collapsed and convulsed. Nine young people

died from taking adulterated substances (known as "fake Ecstasy") containing poisonous substitute chemicals. Finally there were National Institute on Drug Abuse, or NIDA, reports of possible changes in the brains of users and fluctuating levels of the mood-controlling chemical serotonin. This troubling news inspired a federal program designed to alert the public, and young people in particular, to the dangers of Ecstasy.

Although TV programs and ad campaigns have sent out the alarm about MDMA, use has continued to rise among teenagers. To understand why, it is important to understand the experience of Ecstasy.

I first learned about MDMA in a 1985 Time magazine story. The then-legal stimulant had a very small place on the drug scene since the 1970s. A clever marketing decision to call it "Ecstasy" resulted in attracting an eclectic mix of affluent enthusiasts. Avant-garde therapists were joined by New Age professionals, Deadheads and Dallas yuppies.

I wanted to know more about the euphoric drug called "a six-hour orgasm" by some and "penicillin for the soul" by others, so in 1987 I launched the first federally funded sociological study of Ecstasy users in the U.S.

In interviews with 100 adults averaging 35 years old, we learned that regardless of the user's background, his or her descriptions of the benefits of Ecstasy were consistent. The feeling on MDMA was described as complete acceptance of and by others. Users talked of diminished fear and an increased ability to communicate. We heard much about expressions of tolerance and love as defenses melted away. Most striking, the individuals told us they derived these positive feelings from precious few other settings.

If mature adults found MDMA use so fulfilling, I could only imagine how alluring it would be for teenagers in their adolescent struggles. Although teenagers hadn't been part of the Ecstasy scene back then, it was only a matter of time and availability.

As a parent, I worry about possible adverse effects of Ecstasy on the human brain. I applauded a \$54-million research program supported by NIDA and urge further studies of potential long-term damage. I urge careful dissemination of research findings because teenagers are not likely to be deterred by hysterical warnings about possible problems in their distant future. When I ask teenage users why they have not heeded government warnings of possible brain damage, these veterans of "just say no" express deep cynicism.

"Oh yes," said one 18-year-old regarding problematic brain changes attributed to Ecstasy, "they told us about that with marijuana too. But none of us believes we have holes in our brains, so we just laugh at those messages."

I am very concerned about the use of MDMA in dangerous settings. Most of the Ecstasy-related problems at raves can be attributed to dancing too hard and too long and becoming overheated and dehydrated. Young people need to know that heatstroke can be avoided by cooling off and drinking water.

Perhaps the most significant problem

facing would-be MDMA users is deadly adulterants masquerading as Ecstasy. I support efforts of organizations like DanceSafe, which tests pills to determine whether they are potentially dangerous look-alikes or the real thing. Young people are concerned too, as evidenced by their own efforts to educate themselves about Ecstasy's dangers.

We could, of course, continue to try (unsuccessfully) to scare teenagers into abstinence, as we have for two decades. But I believe a more realistic, pragmatic approach to Ecstasy is "harm reduction." While, of course, we would rather they abstained completely, teens should have accurate information about Ecstasy to avoid serious mishaps. This may sound heretical, but safety should be the bottom line.

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