

Psychedelic Drug Called Ecstasy Gains Popularity in Manhattan Nightclubs

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pg. 58

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A psychedelic drug nicknamed ecstasy, invented in laboratories in the 1970's and outlawed in 1985, is enjoying a vogue in nightclubs in downtown Manhattan, where it is attracting a young and arty following and even sparking a wave of ecstasy theme parties, T-shirts and music.

In ecstasy, a combination of a synthetic mescaline and an amphetamine, the clubgoers believe they have found a mildly hallucinogenic stimulant that amounts to the perfect drug.

Although pharmacologists from both universities and law-enforcement agencies warn that ecstasy is psychologically addictive and can cause long-term damage, and some users admit to bouts of uncontrollable paranoia months after taking it, ecstasy's adherents say it produces hours of euphoria without harming the body or mind.

"It's a wonderful drug," said a 21-year-old party promoter. "This is a depressing era for liberal-minded youth, and ecstasy is a happy, peace-loving, purely positive experience."

Center Stage in Drama

The drug, which became a controlled substance in 1985, has soared in popularity this year, occupying center stage in a wider social drama combining fashion, music and youthful restlessness.

It is difficult to determine how many people are now experimenting with ecstasy across the country. The Federal Drug Enforcement Administration says most manufacture is in clandestine laboratories in Texas and California.

In nightclubs in New York City, several patrons who take the drug at least twice a month said they thought there was only one large-scale dealer in the city, who supplies a core group of 500 regular users. A wider circle of 2,000 or so people pop a capsule occasionally, they said.

Drug-enforcement officials here said they were aware of ecstasy's use in some "inner circles" in Manhattan but had neither seized large quantities of the drug nor been able to purchase any from dealers. "It's an isolated drug," said Robert Strang, a special agent in the New York office of the Drug Enforcement Administration. "It's not something that's available to the drug buyer in New York City."

100-Pill Parties

In recent months there have been "ecstasy parties" at downtown nightclubs in which 100 pills were handed out, the young man who actually handed them out said. At another, 20 people stood in line with paper cups of water and swallowed took their capsules en masse in a mock ritual.

Party invitations are often superimposed with an "X," a symbol for ecstasy, indicating what will be served or should be taken before arriving.

While the drug induces mild hallucinations only at high doses, it has nevertheless contributed to the revival of



The New York Times/Joyce Dopkeen

Keoki Franconi, left, and Michael Alig in Mr. Alig's apartment with an assortment of paraphernalia associated with use of a psychedelic drug known as ecstasy. Items include an X, a symbol for ecstasy; a watch with an X; albums of "acid house" music, and a T-shirt that translates, "Acid house music + ecstasy = happiness."

psychedelic symbols from the late 1960's and early 1970's, when the potent hallucinogen LSD was popular. Today, peace signs, busy paisley prints, smile faces and patches from the American flag are being worn again. They seem to be donned simply out of a nostalgia for the fashion, but many ecstasy users say the drug has made them more aware of politics and more critical of society in general.

Most striking is the parallel rise at some nightclubs of a new kind of music called "acid house," which is a stripped-down, highly percussive disco sound — punctuated by television jingles, spoken non sequiturs and high-pitched beeps — whose overall effect is psychedelic. "The music and the drug were made for each other," said a 22-

year-old disc jockey from Hawaii wearing a T-shirt that reads A+E= (Smiley Face) — read as "Acid House Plus Ecstasy Equals Happiness."

Not Dealt in the Open

Nightclub owners know that some patrons are using ecstasy, but say the capsules and tablets, which cost \$20 per dose, are not being dealt in the open. "It's an expensive drug for spoiled kids," said Steven Lewis, director of The World, a nightclub on East Second Street near Avenue C.

"It's not like pot, in that it's always there," he said. "But when it becomes available, bang, everyone's bombed on it. There are nights when 100 people here are on ecstasy. You can see it in their faces. People look wide-eyed and

very happy. Ecstasy seems to be a good word for it. Frankly, I'm more concerned with people doing crack and heroin than ecstasy, which I don't see as that dangerous."

But research pharmacologists say ecstasy has been shown in tests on animals to destroy nerve endings in the part of the brain which regulates sleep, mood, sexual arousal, perception of pain and aggressive behavior.

Ecstasy, a bitter white powder also called MDMA, short for 3,4-methylenedioxy methamphetamine, is a chemical variation of mescaline, a hallucinogenic drug obtained from the mescal plant, and amphetamine, or speed, a drug that stimulates the central nervous system.

Psychologically Addictive

The D. E. A. considers ecstasy psychologically addictive and maintains that it can cause paranoia and psychosis and that it has been linked to at least a dozen deaths nationwide since 1985. The deaths were from overheating, cardio-vascular failure and accidents, Frank Sapienza, a D.E.A. pharmacologist in Washington said. In one accident case, the victim tried to climb a live electrical wire, he said.

"I am very concerned," said Dr. Charles R. Schuster, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, a branch of the Department of Health and Human Services, in Rockville, Md. "These things tend to be fads. Some hip people pick up the drug, and it rapidly spreads through the social networks. The problem with MDMA is that it not only makes you tap dance, it makes you happy while you tap dance. But then it can turn on you, inducing full-blown paranoia."

Many adherents scoff at such statements as government scare tactics, but one 22-year-old fashion model, who grew up in Paramus, N.J., and now lives with her husband on the east side of Manhattan, is suffering some of the psychological fallout described by researchers. She stopped using ecstasy in August after having taken it up to three times a week since February.

'I Get Really Paranoid'

"When I'm alone at night now, I get really paranoid and depressed," she said. "I get flashes of these death and destruction images all the time. I'm not even on drugs, and I walk around my apartment absolutely terrified. I think it's from the ecstasy because I'm remotely aware of having these haunting thoughts and feelings while I was on it."

"Ecstasy is scary because the high is so good, it's too good to be true, and somehow, by contrast, everything in reality starts to seem awful," she said. "The first few times you take it you're very high and light. But as you continue taking it, it becomes heavier and heavier. It's a really intense drug, and I think a lot of people don't realize that."

Some in the club world think drug-enforcement officials have ignored ecstasy because it is less visible than crack and heroin and has not caught the public's attention. "It's an elitist

drug, and they're not going to see it on the street," said Bill Brusca, the general manager of the Tunnel, a cavernous discothèque at the corner of 12th Avenue and 26th Street. "They're going to see it at parties, in discos and clubs. But it doesn't create problems the way crack does."

Drug experts say ecstasy emerged in the early 1970's as a substitute for methylenedioxy amphetamine, or MDA, which was outlawed in the late 1960's. But it wasn't until the early to mid-1980's that ecstasy came into regular use in the gay community, on college campuses and in nightclubs.

LSD for Older Crowd

LSD has also been spotted in nightclubs in the last year, club managers say, but it seems to be preferred by a

crowd in its late 20's and 30's — older than ecstasy's fans, who tend to be in their late teens and early 20's.

"Until now, every concept and every fad has been done and redone, but Ecstasy is totally new and unlike anything you've ever experienced," said a 21-year-old graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology who grew up in South Bend, Ind. and takes the drug, on average, twice a month. "It's ideal in nightclubs because ecstasy is such a social drug. You want to talk and dance and be with your friends. But it's also great in Central Park or a museum. I've never known anyone who has had a bad trip on it."