



Understanding Substance Abuse in College Students

Dr Susan Kennedy

Scientia

UNDERSTANDING SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Substance abuse in college students is a particular concern. **Dr Susan Kennedy**, Department of Psychology at Denison University in Ohio, USA, recently led a collaboration with colleagues from the Ohio State University and Kenyon College to explore alcohol and drug use in college students. More specifically, Dr Kennedy and the team wanted to identify at-risk groups and promote student well-being.

Burning the Candle at Both Ends

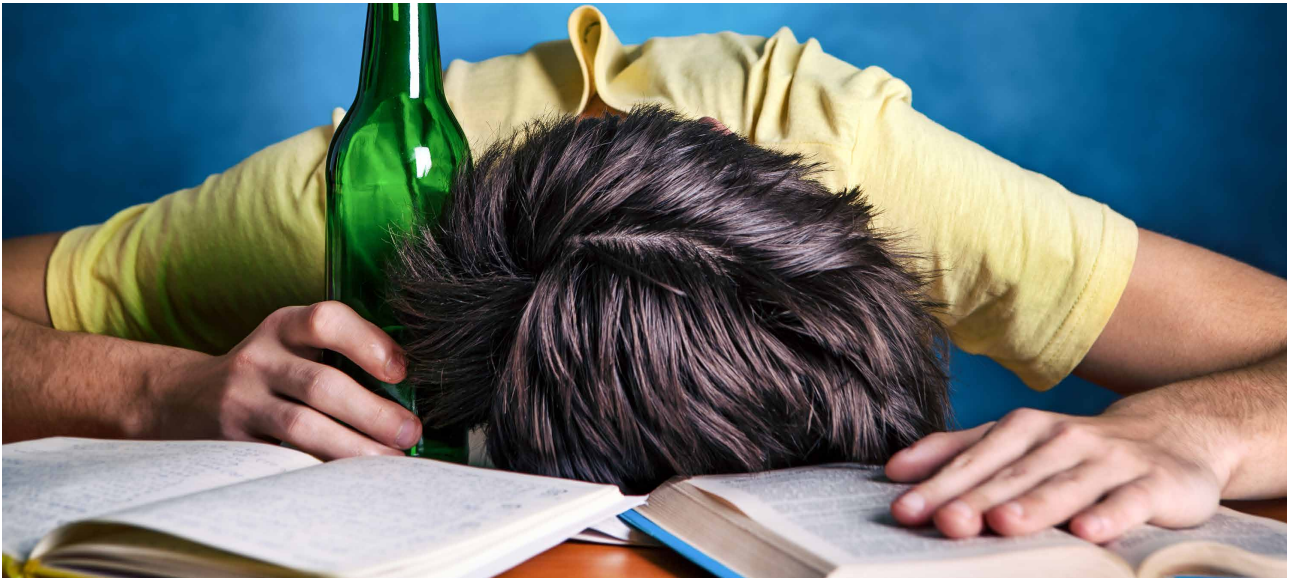
Student life is often associated with working late into the night for papers, other assignments, and exams, somehow balanced with a hectic social schedule involving parties and, inevitably, alcohol. The World Health Organization states that alcohol consumption causes death and disability relatively early in life, with 13.5% of the total deaths of 20–39-year-olds being attributed to alcohol. Alcohol use is also associated with a number of high-risk behaviours, such as illegal drug use and risky sexual behaviours. In particular, the nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NMUPS) by students is on the rise.

Dr Susan Kennedy worked with her colleagues Paula Millin from the Department of Psychology at Kenyon College and Gary Kennedy from the Office of Student Academic Success at Ohio State University to investigate the relationship between self-reported invincibility, alcohol problems, and the nonmedical use of prescription stimulants. Their critical aim was to support student health and well-being.

The Invincible Student

Dr Kennedy notes that during young adulthood, deleterious behaviours are common. She adds that previous researchers have explored the factors linked to the occurrence of these types of behaviours with the hope of developing targeted interventions for those young adults most at risk. One such factor is ‘invincibility’ (often called ‘invulnerability’), which refers to the feeling of immunity from the consequences of one’s behaviour. From an earlier study, she found that the young adults who scored high on a measure of invincibility took part in riskier activities like drinking, smoking and drug use compared to those who scored lower on the scale.

Dr Kennedy states that one of the most potentially damaging behaviours observed in adolescents and young adults is heavy drinking. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in the USA, 54.9% of full-time college students (aged 18–22 years old) reported drinking in the past month, with 37% admitting to binge drinking. Dr Kennedy stresses



that alcohol misuse in students is linked to significant levels of negative academic and social behaviours such as poor exam performance, missed classes because of hangovers, and physical and sexual assaults.

She goes on to explain the particular concern regarding the use of NMUPS by students. Together with alcohol, NMUPS use has become a significant health concern on campuses over the last twenty years. She adds that students typically take stimulants so they remain awake and alert for longer periods in order to study. These include methylphenidate (Ritalin), amphetamine, and dextroamphetamine (Adderall), used in the treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorders.

Misusing these prescription medicines can result in a myriad of unwanted health consequences, including hallucinations, paranoia, dependency and cardiac problems. She also stresses that many students believe that NMUPS will help them achieve their academic goals. Meanwhile, research shows the opposite, with NMUPS being linked with lower grades and missed classes.

Asking the Students

Dr Kennedy says that gaining a better understanding of the psychology behind these behaviours is important for educational efforts and for promoting the health of vulnerable students. Dr Kennedy and her colleagues conducted a preliminary study to explore the relationships between self-reported invincibility, alcohol use, and NMUPS. They had 175 participants who were 18 years or older (mean age was 19.37 years) who were enrolled at two Midwestern residential colleges. The participants completed questionnaires on demographics, stimulant use, a Student Alcohol Questionnaire, and an Adolescent Invincibility Tool. The responses were then analysed using structural equation modelling and various statistical methods.

Dr Kennedy and her team gathered sufficient data to test three hypotheses. They thought that there would be a direct relationship between student invincibility and alcohol use and NMUPS, with the students who perceived themselves to be more invincible experiencing more of the negative consequences of drinking and being more likely to engage with NMUPS. The team also thought that there would be gender differences on the measure of invincibility, with males reporting higher levels of invincibility and NMUPS, and also that men who were members of Greek organisations and consumed alcohol, would be more likely to engage with NMUPS.

The Next Steps

Dr Kennedy and her colleagues confirmed their ideas with the data from the questionnaires. She further explains that they found significant relationships between invincibility, alcohol-related problems, and Greek organisation membership, with males reporting higher levels of invincibility. She says their study showed that alcohol problems may be related to NMUPS, and students reporting high levels of invincibility may be at risk for NMUPS. She adds that such students might benefit from education about the potentially harmful consequences of taking these medicines without a prescription.

Dr Kennedy notes that while this study has some limitations, it opens up further avenues of research and refinement of the methodologies used. This was a small study, and Dr Kennedy adds that some of the questions may not have applied to their particular student group (for example, questions about driving under the influence).

Regardless of the limitations of the study, these preliminary data suggest that self-reported invincibility may be a useful measure to examine the engagement in potentially harmful behaviours that are often seen in students, such as NMUPS. Given that very little data on the relationship between invincibility and NMUPS can be found, this study offers valuable insights.



Meet the Researcher

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Dr Susan Kennedy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Denison University, Ohio. She is also currently the Chair of Health, Exercise, and Sport Studies as well as part of the Senior Faculty, and has been a member of the Neuroscience Faculty Group since 1999. Over her academic career, she has researched, lectured, and taught at several institutions, including the Ohio State University Medical School. She has received several awards, including the PPP Award for Pedagogical Innovation in 2015 and again in 2019. In 1978, Dr Kennedy earned her BA in Psychology at Florida Atlantic University and, in 1980, her MA in Experimental Psychology. In 1985, she completed her PhD in Psychobiology and Psychopharmacology at the Ohio State University and later held a postdoctoral appointment in Behavioral Immunology there.

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FURTHER READING

S Kennedy, P Millin, GJ Kennedy, [A Preliminary Study Examining Self-Reported Invincibility, Alcohol Problems, and the Nonmedical Use of Prescription Stimulants in College Students](#), Journal of Drug Issues 2022, 52(1), 3–14, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220426211037267>

