Mothers’ little helpers

Housewives are turning to cocaine and Prozac as a way of getting through the day. But, says Sam Hart, although the drugs may have changed, women have been using legal and illegal substances as a daytime pick-me-up for centuries.

At the height of her habit Marie was getting through around two grams of coke a day. There was nothing particularly unusual in this. A former party girl – she was used to stretching her Friday nights through to Sunday lunchtimes with the help of stimulants. But this time she wasn’t taking the drug to party until the early hours. She was taking it to do the housework.

“I really hate to admit this but it started when I was pregnant with my first child,” she says. “I’d been used to going out all the time and suddenly all that just stopped. I just stayed in my flat and got fat and depressed. I started taking a couple of lines a day to help me get on with things. Everything seemed so difficult without it.” Within a matter of weeks she found she couldn’t face a pile of ironing without a couple of lines to see her through.

“For a short time it seemed to make things more bearable,” she says, “but then I got terrible panic attacks. I was too scared to hold my baby because I was shaking so much. I thought the baby must know I was crap and would hate me. I just used to long for him to go to sleep.”

On a knife edge: women have a history of turning to drugs to combat the drudgery of housework

GETTING THROUGH THE DAY

Drug workers are reporting an increase in mothers turning to DIY cures such as speed and cocaine to get them through the day. Women who have given up work to start families are resorting to drugs to fill the void left by interesting careers and busy social lives, while young mothers living in deprived areas are turning to amphetamines to make their lives more bearable.

“There’s certainly anecdotal evidence to suggest that women are using these drugs to help them cope with the pressures of everyday life,” says Professor John Henry, a clinical toxicologist from St Mary’s Hospital, London.

“We are coming across a lot of young women, with kids, who are using speed,” said one drug worker based in Greater Manchester. “They may be unemployed with husbands in and out of jail. They tell us speed gives them a lift and helps them get their housework done that bit faster.”

But hard-pressed or bored housewives staving off depression with drugs and alcohol is not a new thing. Women at both ends of the social spectrum have been turning to chemical cures since the gin craze of the eighteenth century when much of the slum-dwelling population of London was experiencing life through an alcohol-soaked haze. Women with their double burdens of childcare and hard, thankless work were voracious consumers – with devastating social consequences. In one particularly harrowing tale – Judith Defour – a young textile worker was convicted of strangling her infant daughter and leaving her naked in a field. She and another woman had sold the child’s clothes for 16 pence and split the money to spend on gin.

As licensing laws were introduced to curb gin abuse, people turned increasingly to experiment with opiates. Laudanum (opium with an alcohol base – traditionally sold as a painkiller) was used in
abundance by mums across the social divide, most notably by the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. And it was not just housewives who got high while their husbands were at work. Opiate mixtures were seen as the perfect cure for fractious babies and were marketed as “Baby Mixture” “Mother’s Quietness” and “Soothing Syrup”. Such comforting labels disguised the dangers of the drug and many infants died from overdoses.

TEA AND MORPHINE?
The early twentieth century saw a lull in the phenomena of mothers’ pick-me-ups, although in 1902 the British Medical Journal reported a new fashion for upper class morphine tea parties. “A number of ladies meet at 4 o’clock every afternoon, tea is served, servants are sent out of the room, the door is locked, the guests bare their arms and the hostess produces a small hypodermic syringe with which she administers an injection to each person in turn,” the article said. “It is only too true that alcoholism, morphinism, cocainism and other supposed means of getting beyond a monotonous daily life are becoming increasingly prevalent among women.”

After World War II, women—who had been called upon to work in factories and farms to support the war effort—gradually trickled back to the kitchen sink. Until the 1950s it was common for bored housewives to buy amphetamine-based drugs from the chemists. In 1963, the use of drugs to alleviate housewives’ boredom returned with a vengeance with the introduction of the ‘wonder drug’ Valium.

Widely believed to have no side effects, Valium was embraced wholeheartedly by doctors as a cure for the perennial problem of ‘nerve women’. Its popularity inspired the Rolling Stones song Mother’s Little Helper, released in 1966: “She goes running for the shelter/Of a mother’s little helper/And it helps her on her way/Gets her through her busy day”. At the height of its use, in 1979, 30 million benzodiazepine prescriptions were written out per year—the majority of them to women.

And such was the medical establishment’s enthusiasm for the drug that many women dared not argue. Janice, now a mother of three grown-up children remembers being prescribed Valium as a means of curing her post natal depression in the 70s. “I took one and it knocked me for six. I felt like a complete zombie. I wanted to stop but was too scared to tell the doctor in case he stopped seeing me. So I just used to turn up and take the tablets and put them in my cabinet.”

Although the drug helped millions of women deal with depression, anxiety and insomnia—others began to complain of horrific withdrawal symptoms including violence, increased depression, nausea and hallucinations. Users claim they are left with very little support from a medical establishment that got them hooked on the drug in the first instance. Beat the Benzos—a support group claim there are around 1.2 million people dependent on the drugs in the UK.

PROZAC NATION
In the 1990s a new kind of antidepressant began to displace benzos as the nation’s favourite pick-me-up. Hailed with unrevealing predictability as the new wonder drugs, SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Re-Uptake Inhibitors) which include Prozac and Seroxat, were in their turn deemed to have relatively few debilitating side effects.

There are now around six million Prozac users in the UK. Yet while SSRIs have helped millions of people with depression lead relatively normal lives, many others have complained of violent reactions to Seroxat in particular—including increased depression and risk of suicide. A survey by Norwich Union Healthcare earlier this year showed that hundreds of thousands of patients were being prescribed anti-depressants as a quick fix solution to mild anxiety.

But as doctors are quick to point out, they are often asked to provide medical solutions for what are essentially social problems such as isolation caused by poor housing and unemployment.

“I didn’t have a medical problem,” says Marie, who managed to kick her habit along with her boyfriend, “I was lonely and bored. Being stuck on your own with kids is lonely and boring. I suppose I needed somewhere to go and someone to talk to. It definitely wouldn’t have happened if I’d lived nearer my mum and my sisters.”

OUTSIDE THE BOX
Although chemical solutions dominate mental health provision in the country—the new century brings hope of a different approach to the problem. Housing providers now have the physical and mental health of their residents very much at the forefront when planning new developments, with job clubs, creches, health clinics and community centres an essential component of estate regeneration plans.

For the past twenty years the Bromley-by-Bow centre in east London has been struggling to combat high levels of depression, isolation and unemployment left behind by 1960s high-rise housing policies and the recession of the 1980s. The centre today provides the community with employment, training, art classes, support groups, exercise classes alongside a community creche started by local women who realised there was a need to look after each other’s children.

“We try and get women out of the house and we’ve got learning programmes where they can get qualifications and a sewing group,” says spokenword Sarah Marshall. “It’s a social activity and they are producing something.”

Mental health campaigners believe that community solutions such as these are vastly preferable to one-size fits all chemical cures for mild depression. But with prescriptions for anti-depressants now outstripping 26 million in the UK alone—there is some way to go before mothers are provided with the kind of help they really need.

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