



Ecstasy the next generation

Ecstasy has always been associated with clubbing. Now it is replacing cans of lager and cider as the street corner drug of choice for children on council estates trying to fend off the bleakness and boredom in their lives.

Max Daly investigates

IT'S not how people would picture a typical night out on ecstasy: a group of school kids sitting and chatting on a bench, popping pill after pill in a gloomy council estate on a cold Tuesday evening.

There are no parties, DJs, strobe lights or dancing. Just a dozen mates swallowing bargain basement ecstasy while hanging out in the street. Sometimes they move on to the local park, riverbank, or if it's really cold, to a stairwell or their own bedrooms.

"I took ecstasy for the first time when I was 12 with my mates in the street near home," says Bobby, 14, from an east Lancashire council estate. "We weren't allowed into the bars or clubs because we were too young. There was nothing to do. All we could do was wander around the streets, and ecstasy livened it up."

E-STREET GANGS

Bobby bought the drugs from a local dealer for pocket money prices. The deal was a bag of 60 pills for £50 – just over 80p each and cheaper than a can of lager or cider. Along with a group of around 12 friends, he swallowed around eight ecstasy pills every evening after school and at the weekends for around a year. Although ecstasy pills are generally not as strong as they were five or ten years ago, that still amounts to an eye-popping 3,000 pills over a year.

A *Druglink* investigation has found that Bobby and his mates are part of a growing

trend in ecstasy use, which has so far existed beyond the radar of official statistics and cultural research into the drug. Young people's drug services in Salford, Blackburn and Bolton say they are seeing a significant proportion of early teenage clients using the drug out of its usual party context – and in very large amounts. "We took them very aggressively – chucking them down our throats because we were bored and they were so cheap," adds schoolboy Bobby, who paid for pills by working as a part time mechanic and builder at the weekend. "Usually they are £2.50 a pill and that would have been too much. We took it on the streets, on benches near our estate. We did get a lot of funny looks from people. I think they knew we were taking drugs because they gave us evil stares. Sometimes the police would chase us. We usually took two an hour until they were finished and then chilled out."

An analysis of 11 to 16-year-olds referred to the Lifeline Early Intervention Service (LEIS), which works with secondary school pupils who are threatened with permanent exclusion in East Lancashire, reveals that although there is a growing problem with children becoming "reliant" on cannabis and amphetamine, "reported ecstasy use has hit an all time high – with some taking 15 pills a session". Of the 646 pupils seen by LEIS last year, 345 had used ecstasy. The average age of first use was 14.



NEW TREND

Matthew Benham, of Salford Young People's Service, has witnessed a similar scene in the Manchester suburb, home to some of the most deprived estates in Europe. "I think the fact ecstasy is synonymous with going out is very much changing. What we are seeing is more and more 13 to 15-years-olds staying in and taking a lot of ecstasy. They are taking drugs on their own, with mates, in the streets and at home. It's not a music thing and the club scene in Salford is non-existent. It's so cheap and easy to buy. Some are taking up to 10 pills a day, two at a time." An audit of young people's drug use carried out by Salford DAAT found the average age of first ecstasy use was 12.8, and that pills cost between 70p to £2.

Benham says the drug is mixed with alcohol and anything else they can get their hands on. In Salford ecstasy is seen by teenagers as an acceptable drug to use, unlike heroin, which is viewed as a drug for 'losers'. He puts the new street use of ecstasy down to increased availability and the reduction in price. "For some young people it's just about getting that buzz for as cheap as possible, and for these kids, it's ecstasy."

Dave Seaber, a drug worker with the Project 360 in Bolton, says he has also noticed a rise in street ecstasy use – totally dislocated from the club or party scene. "There is a bigger club scene in Bolton than Salford, but we are seeing an emergence of teenage users taking ecstasy in their homes or local streets," he said.

LET IT ALL OUT

Bobby's friends used to drink alcohol on the streets, but turned to ecstasy when they found it made them talk to each other rather than become aggressive. "It made me talk to my mates and tell them about my feelings, things like girl trouble, what's going on at school and stuff at home," says Bobby. "We talked about whether girlfriends had cheated on us or if we would cheat on them. We gave each other advice and support, they told me things like I should trust my girlfriend. Whenever we mixed it with lager we would just be aggressive towards each other and it got boring."

Val Weston, who runs the education department of LEIS, says despite the problems created by taking so many pills at such a young age – eating disorders, weight loss, irritable behaviour and morning depressions – the drug acts as a useful "communication aid" for groups of young, disaffected teenagers like Bobby's friends.

"They find it's beneficial, moving them in a direction they've never been down," Weston told *Druglink*. "If you are on the fringes of society – vulnerable young males not achieving, who feel they don't belong – ecstasy is offering a sense of belonging, respect and makes them more tolerant of each other." Some children have told her zero tolerance policing in council estates and town centres has resulted in them moving to more remote areas such as parks in order to get high.

Ecstasy's ability to open people up emotionally has been well documented. Scientists in America are carrying out a study, approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, to see if ecstasy could be used as a medicine to help people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The researchers want to see if the emotional closeness reported by ecstasy users can help victims of rape and sexual abuse to talk to therapists. The drug, which is also being trialled at Harvard University as a way of easing anxiety in terminal cancer patients, was given to clients by some alternative therapists in America in the 70s and 80s.

NEW HIGHS

As a result of working with Weston and the LEIS, Bobby has remained in school and stopped taking ecstasy. But he's not living the quiet life. He has decided to swap necking cheap ecstasy for an arguably riskier pastime – free jumping with his mates on local industrial estates. The urban sport – popularised in an advert for Nike and a Channel 4 documentary – involves leaping and tumbling from ledges, columns and walls on buildings.

"Every morning after taking the pills I woke up on a proper downer, all depressed and that. Now all my energy goes on free jumping with a few of the mates I took ecstasy with. I haven't injured myself because I'm quite good at it." ■

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