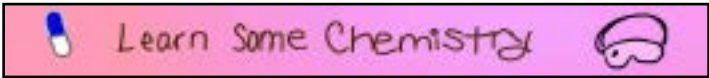


Managing ADHD in a stimulant shortage

4 methods based on research and a clinician’s advice

1

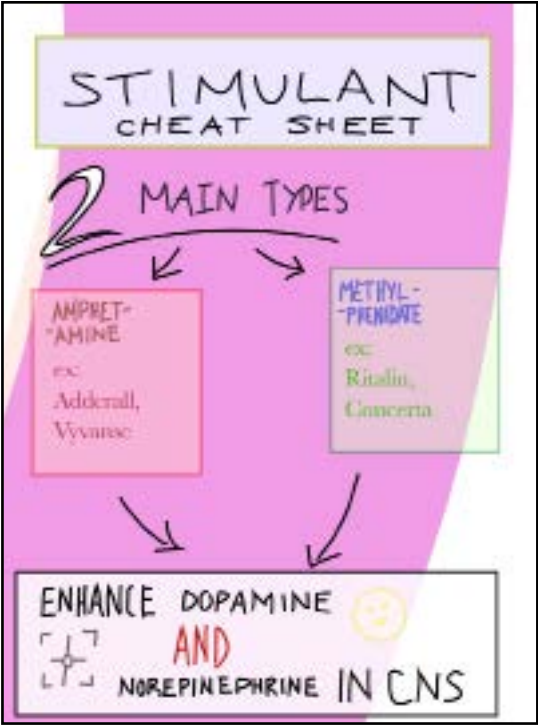
As finals approach for the spring 2024 semester and the stimulant shortage rages on, college students may face issues with accessing their ADHD medications easily. We’ve collected some tips on how to manage symptoms when medication is unavailable.



To meet the DSM-5 criteria for ADHD diagnosis one must exhibit several symptoms related to inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity, and exhibit them before the age of 12. According to the NIH,

Stimulant medications are the gold standard for ADHD treatment, and have been used for over 60 years. The most common ADHD medications fall under two categories based on their active ingredients – in Ritalin and Concerta, this is methylphenidate; in Adderall and Vyvanse, the active ingredient is amphetamine.

Psychiatric research has shown that stimulant medications enhance the function of the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and dopamine in the central nervous system, which causes improved attention, better cognitive function, and higher motivation. Stimulant medications are classified as Schedule II drugs, and have a high propensity for abuse.



Executive dysfunction, lack of motivation, depression and self-esteem issues can come back full swing when medications with this degree of potency are suddenly unavailable.

While behavioral therapy is a highly respected treatment of ADHD, understanding how your brain functions with and without medication is a good first step in validating academic frustration and other returning symptoms during the shortage.

2



CBT, or cognitive behavioral therapy, is a popular mental health treatment method used most frequently in patients with depression and anxiety, substance use disorders, eating disorders, and other mental illnesses. The “cognitive” refers to one’s cognitions or thoughts in response to an event or stimulus, which lead to positive or negative feelings and coping mechanisms, or “behaviors.”

According to CHADD, CBT was developed in recent years for ADHD specifically for adults. Statistical data support that adults with ADHD often suffer from comorbid mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. In turn, negative thought patterns in individuals with ADHD can make productivity and self-esteem a challenge.

To try out CBT on your own, start with a small, manageable task: this could include making a weekly list of deadlines, or breaking an assignment down into smaller sections. According to the CBT method, fulfilling manageable tasks can reinforce positive thoughts about oneself, which increases one’s motivation to continue positive behavior.

3



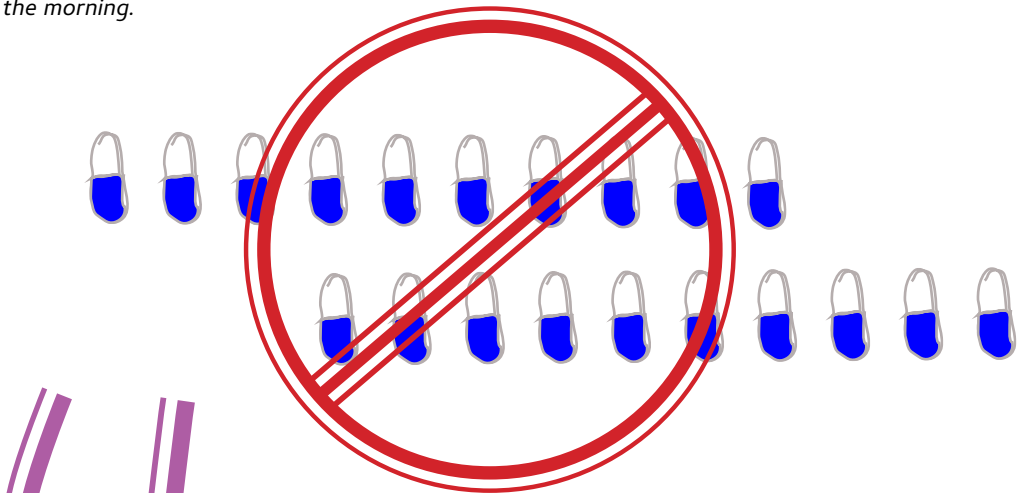
As humans, we obtain what many call a “body clock,” or circadian rhythm, which includes the sleep-wake cycle. Our cycle is about 24 hours. It’s why our energies dip and peak throughout waking hours, and for the most part, it’s very reliable.

However, for adults and adolescents with ADHD, sleep problems and “delayed” circadian rhythm onset can be problematic. Wendy N. Cohen, a psychiatric physician assistant who specializes in ADHD, has seen this issue over the many years she’s treated the disorder.

“The problems with circadian delay aren’t always talked about, because those with ADHD often function better at night and consider themselves night people.”

“This becomes an issue when it gets out of control, because one of the best ways to manage symptoms of ADHD is to practice good sleeping habits,” Cohen said.

Without stimulants, daytime drowsiness and poor sleep hygiene can get even worse. For those struggling with this, experts recommend evening use of melatonin, and bright light therapy in the morning.



4



“It can be hard to manage [ADHD] on your own, especially if you haven’t practiced behavioral methods before. Apps are everything,” Cohen said.

Cohen recommended a few apps that have been useful for her patients during the shortage. She mentioned Inflow, an app designed by ADHD experts, based around CBT principles. She also mentioned Headspace, an app aimed at improving mental health through meditation and mindfulness exercises. Headspace partners with many universities for free student membership, which makes the app a good option for college students.

