

RIETS GRADUATE BIOETHICS & JEWISH LAW PROGRAM

Limitless

The Drug That Makes Hyperfocus a Reality

The rapid adoption of the internet both in work and social environments has also contributed to a general trend of shortening attention spans and a fragmented ability to sustain attention.¹ At the same time there is a nearly unprecedented number of diagnoses of focus and attention-related disorders.² To combat the growing incidence of these diagnoses, physicians have increased their willingness to prescribe medications to treat these conditions. These drugs, sold under the common names of Adderall or Vyvanse, are amphetamines that have the effect of increasing stimulation of the central nervous system and are the most common treatment for attention disorders.

Concurrently, our era is quickly becoming defined by the use and integration of artificial intelligence into nearly every discipline and field of study. The rapid pace of adoption and use of AI has increased the pressure on students and working people to demonstrate their value, creating ever-increasing levels of stress to outperform expectations and their peers. In today's academic institutions and workplaces, where success is increasingly difficult to attain and the barriers to entry are growing ever higher, the desire to

find ways to meet the demands is also breaching the guardrails of the law and common sense.³

One common approach is to gain access to amphetamines through inappropriate means. Needless to say, possession of drugs that are considered controlled substances is a violation of the law and of course should not be done. However, we cannot ignore the reality that many use amphetamines illegally in high-pressure workplaces and academic settings in order to increase productivity. The question we must address, aside from any halachic violations involved when a person violates the law of the land, is, what are the ramifications of using these drugs illegally on the individual and society at large?

Like many categories of drugs, amphetamines can pose significant health risks when used incorrectly. But context matters. Opiates, for example, can be life-threatening when used



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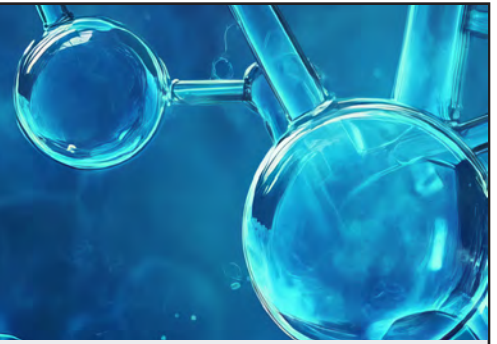
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recreationally and without proper medical supervision, yet they can also be used safely and beneficially in medical settings, such as morphine to control severe pain in the intensive care unit for the sickest of patients. Amphetamines are no different. When prescribed appropriately and taken under the care of a qualified medical professional, they can be life-changing for those who use them. Adderall and Vyvanse have dramatically improved the ability of some students and employees to succeed in school and in the workplace. They would never have



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been able to accomplish their goals without the aid of these medications. In small amounts, amphetamines can even help people who don't need them. Someone struggling to focus on occasion, or someone who needs a few extra hours of serious focus, might, on occasion, be tempted by the boost that an amphetamine might give them.

Yet, I think that there are two concerns that even the occasional misuse of such a drug can still pose. The first is a physical concern: the feeling of focus while using these drugs and the subsequent feeling of accomplishment when you see just how much you were able to do is a powerful inducement to continue to use them. Sustained use of amphetamines, though, can lead to what some describe as a zombie-like state.⁴ The inability to feel anything and the hollowing out of a person's emotional state are major impediments to success and, more importantly, to *avodas Hashem*.

The second concern is the manner in which we become a more productive and effective person. Some people need medication to help them be their best selves, and in the care of proper medical professionals that is an admirable goal. But for those seeking a boost, they are essentially short-circuiting the process of accomplishment. The Gemara teaches that a person will reliably prefer the fruits of their own labor over someone else's, even if the other's work

results in greater quantity.⁵

Additionally, one interpretation of the mitzvah of *Kedoshim Tihiyu*, famously offered by Ramban, is that one should

be *mekadesh* themselves and not be a *naval* with the permission of the Torah. This can be interpreted as a call to opt for self-development rather than use other avenues to achieve success,



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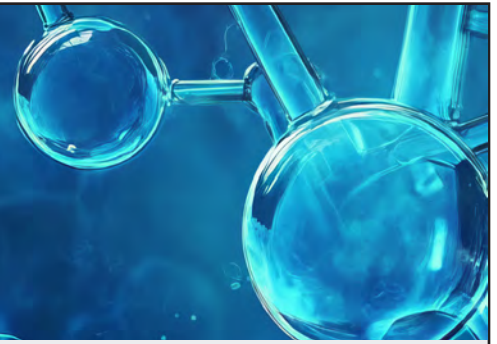
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even if they are technically permitted.⁶ In a responsum, Rav Schachter shlita discusses the recreational use of other types of drugs and argues that use of drugs that lessen a person's ability to exercise rational choice is a failure of one's *avodas Hashem*.⁷ Abuse of amphetamines would certainly lessen a person's ability to choose to invest in their *avodas Hashem* (and may also reduce their ability to fulfill the precept of *Ivdu es Hashem b'simcha*).

Lastly, there is the impact that illegal use of amphetamines to accomplish professional goals has on others. The Gemara prohibits misrepresentation of one's intent when acting on behalf of their fellow as a form of theft: *geneivas daas*.⁸ Presenting yourself to your employer as more productive or efficient because of the illegal use of amphetamines is certainly a violation of *geneivas daas*. Ritva cites the opinion of the Baalei HaTosfos that this is a form of theft severe enough to constitute

a prohibition *mid'oraisa* even against a non-Jew.⁹ Presenting yourself to an employer as more capable, or presenting academic accomplishments that are not due to your own capabilities but rather to your use of a drug that should not be available to you, would be highly inappropriate. Rav Moshe Feinstein went so far as to argue that any money earned now and in the future because of that form of dishonesty is *gezel*.¹⁰

Ultimately, there are many ways to gain an advantage for yourself when measured against economic or scholastic achievement. To focus solely on the metric of achievement at the expense of how we achieve it means we fail to evaluate our choices the way we should. Our approach should be to ensure that our choices and methods of accomplishment ultimately bring us closer to serving the will of Hashem through a proper frame of mind, ironclad commitment, and hard work.

Endnotes

1. Firth, Josh A., et al. "Exploring the Impact of Internet Use on Memory and Attention Processes." *International journal of environmental research and public health* vol. 17,24 9481. 17 Dec. 2020
2. Abdelnour, Elie et al. "ADHD Diagnostic Trends: Increased Recognition or Overdiagnosis?" *Missouri Medicine* vol. 119,5 (2022): 467-473.
3. Bavarian, Niloofar et al. "The Illicit Use of Prescription Stimulants on College Campuses: A Theory-Guided Systematic Review." *Health education & behavior : the official publication of the Society for Public Health Education* vol. 42,6 (2015): 719-29.
4. Talbot, Margaret. "Brain Gain." *The New Yorker*, 27 Apr. 2009, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/04/27/brain-gain
5. *Bava Metzia* 38a.
6. *Vayikra* 19:2, Ramban *ibid*.
7. Published Responsa.
8. *Chullin* 94a.
9. Ritva *ibid*.
10. *Iggeros Moshe* CM 2:30.

Additional Questions to Consider:

- What role do communities play in managing recreational drug use? Are safe injection sites a Halakhically permissible idea?
- Are drugs that improve function from an acceptable baseline permitted at all? How are drugs like amphetamines different from stimulants like caffeine?
- Do neighbors have a right to prevent drugs and safe injection sites from being used or sold in their neighborhood?