Substance Use in Undergraduate Students with Histories of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): The Role of Impulsivity.

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Abstract

BACKGROUND:
Emerging adulthood (18-25 years old) is regarded as a time of identity exploration that includes a peak in risky behaviors, such as substance use and misuse. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is also associated with greater levels of risky behaviors, including substance use and misuse; however, there is a lack of research on substance use by emerging adults with ADHD, in particular, the potential mechanisms that may facilitate this risk.

OBJECTIVES:
The present study builds on the existing research regarding the association between ADHD and substance use by examining roles of multiple facets of impulsivity in facilitating this association during emerging adulthood.

METHODS:
In a sample of 197 undergraduate students (24 students with an ADHD diagnostic history), we assessed for components of impulsivity (e.g., urgency, sensation-seeking) and rates of alcohol abuse, tobacco use, cannabis use, illicit drug use, and stimulant medication misuse within the past year.

RESULTS:
Findings indicate that facets of impulsivity, as a whole, explained the association between an ADHD diagnostic history and both illicit drug use and alcohol abuse such that students with ADHD histories tended to report higher levels of impulsivity, which increased the risk of alcohol abuse and illicit drug use. Higher levels of specific facets of impulsivity, particularly negative urgency, also facilitated associations between having ADHD and engaging in most forms of substance use tested herein.

CONCLUSIONS:
Specific facets of impulsivity appear to be important mediators of the association between ADHD and substance use and should be considered as potential targets for substance use interventions for this population.