

Childhood depression may encourage ecstasy use

24 February 2006

Children with symptoms of anxiety and depression may have an increased tendency to use ecstasy in adolescence or young adulthood, finds a study published online by the BMJ today.

The use of ecstasy is associated with emotional health problems, such as depression, psychotic symptoms, and anxiety disorders. But its not clear whether emotional problems are a consequence of using ecstasy or emotional problems lead to ecstasy use.

Researchers in the Netherlands investigated whether use of ecstasy is preceded by symptoms of behavioural and emotional problems in childhood and early adolescence.

They assessed ecstasy use in 1580 individuals from childhood into adulthood. The first assessment took place in 1983, before ecstasy appeared as a recreational drug in the Netherlands. Use of the drug was then assessed 14 years later, providing a unique opportunity to investigate if a pathway from behavioural and emotional problems leading to ecstasy use exists.

Individuals with signs of anxiety and depression in 1983 showed an increased risk of starting to use ecstasy.

Ecstasys effects are supposed to include enhanced feelings of bonding with other people, euphoria, or relaxation, say the authors. Individuals with signs of anxiety or depression may be particularly susceptible to these positive effects and may therefore use ecstasy to relieve their symptoms.

However, long term exposure to ecstasy may result in increased depressive symptoms. Individuals with signs of anxiety or depression in childhood are at risk of using ecstasy and may develop depressive symptoms. This may explain part of the link that has been found between ecstasy use and later depression in other studies, add the authors.

Other factors not tested in this study may account for the increased tendency to use ecstasy in some individuals. They include the social environment, novelty seeking, or substance use of parents.

Focusing on these vulnerable individuals in future studies will increase our insight into the potential harmful effects of ecstasy on brain neurotransmitter systems and associated psychopathology, they conclude.

Commenting on the research, Martin Barnes, Chief Executive of DrugScope said: "This study highlights the links between drug use and poor mental and emotional health. The suggestion that young people with emotional health problems may use ecstasy to feel better is not surprising, particularly as the drug creates feelings of euphoria and emotional closeness to others. This is an important contribution towards understanding why vulnerable young people, and indeed adults, are more susceptible to drug use and misuse. The research does raise a question as to whether ecstasy use can cause longer-term mental health problems, but certainly does not rule this out."

For more information go to

Source: www.bmj.com

Posted: 24th February 2006