



Soft Focus

A popular ADHD medication gave Jayme Cyk high-functioning superpowers for a decade—until the day came to call it quits.

In the last six months, podcasts have taken me on a self-care odyssey. They inspired me to launch my own consulting agency and start a beauty brand with my husband—and one pod in particular made me realize that after a decade, it was time to quit the prescription stimulant drug Concerta.

In 2009, while studying fashion design at Parsons School of Design, I found that I couldn't sew in a straight line, patternmaking was beyond boring, and my draping was a joke. Concerned, I met with a psychiatrist and explained that I was nervous about getting through college. After one session, she whipped out her Rx pad and handed me a prescription for Concerta, typically prescribed for ADHD. Almost immediately, I became a straight-A student, a stark contrast to the Cs I received in high school. It wasn't that I experienced a sense of fog lifting—it was more like a rush, which would make me slightly anxious and incredibly focused, like when you're looking for your lost cell phone. I could sew for six hours, write a paper in three hours, and manage to get to the gym, all while holding an in-depth conversation with a peer or colleague. I was even able to multitask, a skill I had never attained before Concerta.

Although I met with my doctor in person every three months, what I wasn't thinking about at the time has since come to the forefront regarding ADHD medications: The stimulants are highly addictive; the potential side effects of misuse can be as serious as heart attack and stroke; and the rise in inappropriate prescriptions has caused the American Medical Association to issue concerns. I was unknowingly part of a generation so hooked, there's even a 2018 Netflix documentary about the phenomenon called *Take Your Pills*.

When I graduated from college, quitting Concerta never crossed my mind. With it, I was able to masterfully balance multiple responsibilities in my first job as an assistant beauty editor at *Women's Wear Daily*, and later as beauty director at Violet Grey. Concerta became a ritual I couldn't do without. And on the rare occasion I forgot to take it, I'd feel out of sorts. I'd become lethargic, irritable, groggy, and extremely unmotivated, all typical side effects of Concerta withdrawal.

About six months ago, I was listening to an episode of the podcast *That's So Retrograde*, and the guest was L.A.-based holistic health coach Vanessa Fitzgerald. She explained how and why she successfully weaned herself off Adderall, another prescription stimulant drug. One thing she said about being on Adderall really resonated with me: "There were times I'd be in situations where people would be dying laughing, and I couldn't laugh." I remember

hearing that and saying out loud, "Oh my God, that's me." I began racking my brain to remember the last time I'd let out a legitimate laugh, versus just smiling when someone cracked a joke. I realized I didn't know how to comfort friends and family, and I was closed in my relationships. Concerta was suppressing my emotional responses, which isn't uncommon. "All psychiatric medications change emotional experiences," says Dan Engle, MD, a Colorado-based psychiatrist and neurology specialist. "Many work as anti-anxiety buffers. They can modulate or affect the emotional landscape."

About two weeks after I'd tuned in to the podcast, a friend of mine who happened to be working with Fitzgerald introduced us. I met with her and loved what she had to say about quitting Concerta, but I was scared. Could I still do great work sans medication? Could I even manage my day-to-day? After two months of considering it, I decided to try.

Fitzgerald encouraged me to drop the medication, no weaning, because I was already on such a low dose. The protocol was a holistic lifestyle change: Eliminate sugar, grains, beans, dairy, and corn from my diet, and cut out alcohol for at least 23 days (longer if possible). Her plan sounded reasonable enough for me to agree to without consulting with my psychiatrist, who had always told me I didn't need to take Concerta every day anyway. I was also on the lowest dose—18 milligrams—as she had been reducing it for the last three and a half years. [Editor's note: Always talk to your doctor before making any decisions to go off your prescription or change your dose.]

Honestly, the diet wasn't even the hardest part. Fitzgerald believes in feeding the brain not only with healthy whole foods but also with supplements for deficiencies, which she determines with Nutrition Response Testing. NRT is a controversial method similar to kinesiology that analyzes a person's health by testing arm muscle strength while the practitioner simultaneously places a hand on the body at the site of various organs. Between Fitzgerald's recommendations and my own research, I was, at one point, taking a whopping 40 pills a day, from vitamin D to a digestive enzyme to an ingestible gel capsule that supports the kidneys.

Day one of the program was intense. My emotions were all over the place. I had a panic attack in hot yoga and strained to stay awake at my computer. Day two, day three, and basically every day after that was a new hurdle. There were good days, when I got plenty of work done with a clear head, and there were really bad ones, when I was irritable and sometimes depressed. I generally never miss a workout class, but during that time, I paid a pair of Manolo Blahniks' worth of absence fees because I couldn't pull myself out of bed.

After two months off my meds and in the middle of starting my own company, I still couldn't focus for long bouts of time when I needed to, so I decided to test a slew of herbal nootropics—supplements, often referred to as "natural Adderall," that claim to support and boost memory, reaction time, attention, and focus (claims strong enough to raise warnings from both the AMA and FDA regarding safety and efficacy—for the record,



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though, that didn't ultimately discourage me). The last year has seen a spate of new offerings from brands itching to get in on what some predict will become a booming market. I tried The Nue Co Nootro-Focus, Sakara Superfood Nootropic Chocolates, Moon Juice SuperYou, and Goop Nerd Alert in the recommended doses, but to varying effect. Sometimes I felt nothing, and sometimes I was able to concentrate and do my work for hours on end. "All medicines have their sweet spot," Engle says. "If the patient's threshold is really high or if someone is coming off a stimulant, the dose may need to be increased." Amanda Chantal Bacon, founder of Moon Juice, echoes that sentiment. "As someone who was on [ADHD] medication, I found

it's not a nice clean switch [to a nootropic]," she says. "You can start to use SuperYou and Brain Dust on day one, but don't expect them to work right away. You will still feel like shit."

At seven weeks Concerta-free, I had a check-in with my psychiatrist to get a refill of a different medication and told her about quitting the stimulant. I explained the side effects, how I currently felt, and that I didn't feel the need to get back on it. I was able to get my work done (if not at my usual speed), and I knew some strategies to pull me out of a slump (work out, take a walk, step away from my computer), partially thanks to Fitzgerald. "With stimulants, we advise that you remove them gradually and focus on supporting the body with a good diet, better sleep habits, meditation, and certain targeted supplements," says Ellen Vora, MD, a board-certified holistic psychiatrist, acupuncturist, and yoga teacher based in New York City. "We go in with the understanding that at the end we will get off [it], but the reality is that someone may feel like a shell of their former self during the process." It took about three months before I broke that shell, and it sometimes still wreaks havoc on my day. But the supplements and diet were key for me, as they made me feel more energized, and I even lost a little weight. Without that, I don't think I could have gone cold turkey.

Still, I struggled with significant anxiety and lack of focus. My psychiatrist recommended L-tyrosine, an amino acid that, in her experience, could improve learning, memory, and alertness, especially during stressful situations. "Like most stimulants, tyrosine builds dopamine," Engle says. My psychiatrist noted that while L-tyrosine can be found in nootropics, it might be worth trying as a single ingredient. When I got home, I ordered Thorne L-tyrosine and took it as soon as it arrived. Now that was game-changing. About 20 minutes after I took the supplement, everything felt a little bit easier. There wasn't the jittery rush of a stimulant. My mood was enhanced, and I was able to focus on my work for a couple of hours without the constant need to look at Instagram, grab a snack, or stare into space. Now I usually take one 500-milligram capsule when I'm about to start writing so my brain doesn't wander, and I'm able to take up to three a day. Would I call it nature's Adderall? Probably not. But it doesn't feel like a placebo effect, either. Six weeks in, I feel great about it, and I've recommended it to 20-plus people, who also find it to be incredibly helpful. "If it's going to give you confidence and make you feel like you're on top of things and going to crush it in life," Fitzgerald once told me of finding the right nootropic or supplement, "then fuck yeah."