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Valium's Contribution to Our New Normal

By ROBIN MARANTZ HENIG

IT wasn't funny, really, but everybody laughed at the scene in the 1979 film "Starting Over" when Burt Reynolds's character had a panic attack in the furniture department of Bloomingdale's (something to do with terror at the prospect of buying a couch). "Does anyone have a Valium?" his brother called out as Burt hyperventilated. The punch line: Every woman in the store reached into her purse and pulled out a little vial of pills.

Nor was it surprising that all those Bloomie's shoppers could be so helpful, since by that time Valium, which had been introduced in 1963, was the best-selling prescription drug in America, with billions of blue or yellow or white pills, each stamped with a trademark V, sold every year.

Valium was, significantly, one of the first psychoactive drugs to be used on a large scale on people who were basically fine. It has since been surpassed by other drugs, like the popular tranquilizer Xanax. But with the pharmaceutical giant Roche announcing that it will soon close the Nutley, N.J., plant where Valium and its predecessor, Librium, were developed, it's a good time to remember how revolutionary these "minor tranquilizers" were half a century ago. These were the drugs that gave us a new way to slay our inner demons, medicating our way to a happier life.

How did Roche convince physicians that it was O.K. to offer their patients a bottled form of serenity? How did the physicians persuade their patients? And how did the company's success in this venture shape our collective attitudes toward normal versus abnormal, stoic versus foolhardy, and the various ways available to cope with the ups and downs of daily life?

Marketing, essentially — which was first put into action with Librium, one of those evocative drug names that pharmaceutical companies invent. Librium was introduced in 1960 and promptly outsold its predecessors, the barbiturates, because it had fewer side effects. (Barbiturates were serious downers, making people sleepy and zombielike, and they were

habit-forming; Marilyn Monroe died from an overdose.)

“A Whole New World ... of Anxiety” read one of the early Roche ads for Librium, featuring a young woman with a pageboy hairdo holding an armload of books, wearing a short stadium coat and heading off to college. The copy made it sound as though every step in this “whole new world” called out for a tranquilizer. “The new college student may be afflicted by a sense of lost identity in a strange environment ... Her newly stimulated intellectual curiosity may make her more sensitive to and apprehensive about unstable national and world conditions.”

The ad lists other sources of “anxiety” in a college student’s life — new friends, new influences, stiff competition for grades and tests of her moral fiber — that could just as easily be seen as growing pains, or as a healthy response to the turbulent world of the 1960s, when this ad appeared in *The Journal of the American College Health Association*. But Roche wanted doctors to believe that they were problems, not adventures, and that they warranted a prescription for Librium.

The next step was to develop something better — stronger, faster acting, less toxic. The Roche chemist who had originally stumbled upon Librium, Leo Sternbach, went back to the lab and tweaked the compound. Then he tested the drug on humans — in this case, the mothers-in-law of a few Roche executives. The executives thought that the new drug, Valium, rendered their mothers-in-law significantly less annoying.

In retrospect, Librium turned out to be a great first act, teaching Roche how to pitch a psychoactive drug to doctors of healthy patients who just needed a little something to unjangle their nerves. By the time Valium arrived, Roche was poised to dominate the field. In 1974, Americans filled nearly 60 million [prescriptions](#) for Valium.

Taking a pill to feel normal, even a pill sanctioned by the medical profession, led to a strange situation: it made people wonder what “normal” really was. What does it mean when people feel more like themselves with the drug than without it? Does the notion of “feeling like themselves” lose its meaning if they need a drug to get them there?

At the same time that Valium became famous for being in everyone’s medicine chest (or in every department store shopper’s purse), it also became famous for ruining lives. Elizabeth Taylor said she was addicted to Valium plus whiskey, Jack Daniel’s in particular. Tammy Faye Bakker said she was addicted to Valium plus nasal spray. Elvis Presley’s personal poison was Valium mixed with an assortment of other prescriptions. And Karen Ann

Quinlan, the young woman languishing in a chronic vegetative state while her parents fought all the way to the New Jersey Supreme Court for the right to remove her from life support, originally lapsed into a [coma](#) in 1975 from a combination of Valium and gin.

Nearly 50 years after Valium was introduced and aggressively marketed, we've learned its lessons well. My generation of aging baby boomers does its brain styling, by and large, with [antidepressants: Prozac, Wellbutrin, Celexa, Paxil, Zoloft](#). And for my daughters' generation, the millennials, the pills of choice tend to be [Ritalin](#) and Adderall, for mental focus.

But when Americans are feeling out of sorts, we are still more likely to turn to anti-anxiety drugs than to any other kind. The leading successor to Valium, Xanax, outsells every other psychiatric drug on the market (48.7 million prescriptions last year). And even Valium is still out there, the classic little-black-dress of tranquilizers. In 2011, 14.7 million prescriptions were written for the drug that first made its cultural mark as a Rolling Stones song ("Mother's Little Helper") back in 1966.

As Roche closes its New Jersey headquarters, it plans to open a smaller research facility in Manhattan in late 2013, part of a wave that city officials hope will turn New York into a biotech mecca. The company's transition reminds us of a phenomenon that's become so common we no longer even think of it as weird: the oxymoronic attainment, through using drugs to make you feel more like yourself, of an artificially induced normal.

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