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Caffeine: The Student Battle for Concentration

Coffee has been around for centuries, but it’s a mystery of when caffeine consumption began. In the 14th century it was used as medicine throughout the Arabic world. Then that yummy bitter drink got a boost into the spotlight during the 15th century because of new grinding and roasting techniques. So why do we here at The Metropolitan love it so much? Well, we mostly like the caffeine, and the newspaper staff is much like the rest of the student body.

As I sit here at the main campus’ library at 8 p.m., I wish there was a cup of something caffeinated next to me. I just stared a little too long at a man who was probably 50 percent hotter than Indiana Jones. This is because my concentration is off, and I apparently rank men on a Harrison Ford scale. Nonetheless, I really want some green tea or coffee to get me through the evening of writing. In fact, looking around at my fellow students, about half of them have coffee cups next to them.

Most Metro students work, have families and attend evening classes. It’s enough to drive any well intentioned student to sleep deprivation. Grabbing a cup or can of caffeine before 6 p.m. class is common. However, is it healthy?

It depends, is the answer. Caffeine can give you more alertness, as seen in military pilots who are given caffeine laced gum. Since drinking a mocha while flying a mission would prove impossible during a barrel roll, they have to settle for gum. Why does this lovely little day brightener boost your energy? Well, according to Janet Raloff’s articletitled “Brain Boosters: Some Natural Supplements Provide Real Food for Thought” and published in Society for Science and the Public, it all has to do with molecule magic. Caffeine blocks adenosine, a chemical created by the body that slows the heart rate and causes drowsiness.

The half-life of caffeine in the blood stream is about 50 percent after six hours, so it could really screw up your circadian rhythm. For students, we struggle with that as it is. Have you ever had a latte in class, then gone home after a night class, and felt like sleep would never come? This was probably due to the caffeine still lingering in your body. Totally sucks, right?

Perhaps there is a different answer? I’ve tried multiple times to tough through night classes without a caffeine fix, and it’s been rough. Do you find at a certain time of the day that a headache comes on? Or maybe your shoulders and neck hold more tension after a few hours without caffeine? A study published in the American Association for the Advancement of Science looked into anxiety and muscle tension caused by caffeine and possible withdrawal from it.

The study found that a sample of college students who were heavy caffeine users measured to have higher anxiety levels and muscle tension while coming down from caffeine. What I’m saying here is not only does your body become drowsy from withdrawal, you may get a headache from the lack of caffeine you are used to. And you could be left feeling anxious with muscle tension without knowing why. Now you know it may be our loved caffeine kicking our butts.

Now that we’re hooked on java, what can we do? Let’s look for alternatives. It has become a social norm to have coffee dates and to chug energy drinks so full of caffeine the consumer is left shaking in their own skin. Maybe backing off the super caffeinated drinks will help students in their studies. Also, Raloff mentions that tea containing L-theanine (an amino acid known for altering brain waves) mixed with small amounts of caffeine can boost concentration. Without the withdrawal of a high level of caffeine, sleep and wellbeing should come quicker for students.

Let’s face it, no matter what your intentions, coffee and caffeinated drinks are here to stay. However, as consumers we can be more health conscious and reach for decaf coffee and tea before night classes to get a little caffeine boost without destroying a good night of sleep afterwards.

As always, I urge you to make healthy decisions, but understand as students it’s not always possible. However, you can take care of your body, mind, and spirit because they will help you throughout your lifelong learning process.