

The Valium Girls: An Epidemic of Addiction in Suburban America

“Mother needs something today to calm her down / And though she's not really ill, there's a little yellow pill / She goes running for the shelter of her mother's little helper.”¹ These lyrics are from The Rolling Stones’ 1966 hit, “Mother’s Little Helper,” and by “little yellow pill,” they are referring to Valium, a prescription drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) just three years prior. Valium is a chemical compound called diazepam, which is in a drug class called benzodiazepines. Because of their ability to slow the nervous system down, benzodiazepines are used for treating anxiety, insomnia, and muscle spasms, among other afflictions.² Valium’s introduction, and immediate success, was situated two decades after WWII, in which America was characterized by rapid suburbanization. Coinciding with the expanding suburbs was a revitalized emphasis on traditional gender roles, especially the archetype of the suburban housewife. In the 1960s, 70s, and even through the 80s, America witnessed a nationwide epidemic of Valium addiction, especially among middle-class white women. By not addressing the deep-rooted social pressures on women’s role as housewives, pharmaceutical companies cultivated a nationwide drug addiction amongst suburban women who were unfulfilled by their domestic duties, marking the shift in America into which drug addiction was not confined to class.

After WWII, the country’s infrastructure changed to confront a housing crisis, indicating an intentional transition into a suburban America. In 1940, before the U.S. entered WWII, 13.4%

¹The Rolling Stones. “Mother’s Little Helper.” *Aftermath*. RCA Victor Studio, 1966, Song.

²“Benzodiazepines,” DEA, <https://www.dea.gov/factsheets/benzodiazepines#:~:text=What%20are%20Benzodiazepines%3F,Ativan%C2%AE%2C%20and%20Klonopin%C2%AE>. AND Cleveland Clinic Medical Professional, “Benzodiazepines (Benzos),” Cleveland Clinic, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/24570-benzodiazepines-benzos>.

of the population lived in the suburbs, but only thirty years later, the American suburban population grew to 37.1% of the country.³ This growth was largely due to intentional efforts to combat the post-war housing crisis, with an estimate of a shortage of five million houses across the country, which had left millions of working-class Americans devastated. In response, the government and private housing enterprises worked in conjunction to increase homeownership rates from 40% of households in 1940 to 60% of households by 1960.⁴ Specifically, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), a product of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt presidency, issued policies that “took the risk out of home lending and made the long-term, low-interest home mortgage the national standard.”⁵ The FHA stimulated suburbanization by building suburban infrastructure, like highways, and granting low-interest loans to builders who in turn achieved mass construction of homes, on a scale of hundreds or thousands of houses per year. This boom formed standardized housing developments, or the picturesque suburbs of the mid-20th century. These homes were built to be uniform, but they also built uniform, or homogenous, communities.

The rise of suburbia in America created pockets of “happy, white families celebrating the postwar suburban dream,”⁶ which deliberately excluded “unwanted” racial groups from these communities.⁷ The norm of a typical suburban family was a young, white, married, heterosexual couple with kids and about 40% of the adults had some education past high school,⁸ but this was not unintentional. The FHA and other government programs used both *de facto* and *de jure*

³U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census, Summary File 1, American FactFinder; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1970*, vol. I, *Characteristics of the Population*, pt. 1, U.S. Summary, section 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1973), 258, cited in: Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, April 26, 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistorical/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-64>.

⁴Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), cited in: Nicolaides and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

⁵Nicolaides and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How The Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), cited in: Nicolaides and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

mechanisms to ensure racial segregation. Previously excluded groups like Italians, Poles, Greeks, and Jews were finding entrance into the white racial identity and were able to attain white middle-class status in the suburbs.⁹ Simultaneously, the FHA denied insured-mortgages to people of color, which created neatly packaged spaces of white superiority. This further cycled into a culture of threats and violence against neighbors from racial minorities, which prompted families to find safety in communities of color, ensuring that a white majority remained in the suburbs. As suburbia was expanding, so too was the “connection between race and place of residence.”¹⁰ So when we think of a mid-20th century suburbanite, there is a clear image of a young, white housewife who stays home to take care of her domestic duties and her white husband who works a 9-to-5 to provide for his family. This standard was also featured in advertisements and television sitcoms,¹¹ which reinforced who suburbia was for.

The surge of suburbs across the country created a gendered American dream, where traditional gender roles created the ideal woman. Post-WWII America marked a return to female domesticity after an era of women entering the workforce. In Betty Friedan’s 1963 manifesto, *The Feminine Mystique*, she identifies how, “All she wanted... was what every other American girl wanted – to get married, have four children, and live in a nice house in a nice suburb. The suburban housewife – she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world.”¹² By “she,” Friedan is referring to a girl who declined a fellowship at Johns Hopkins out of fear of appearing unfeminine. The growing suburbs of America became the dream for young families, and the role of suburban housewife became the dream for young women. In 1953, only 9% of suburban women were employed, compared to

⁹Nicolaidis and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Rupa Huq, *Making Sense of Suburbia Through Popular Culture*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹²Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 18.

27% nationally.¹³ Their aspirations were no longer higher education or professional careers. What first-wave feminism had championed only decades ago was now considered unfeminine, and thus, wrong for women to pursue. As Friedan put it, women heard “over and over... that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity.”¹⁴

In the context of suburbia, women centered their lives around their roles as wives and mothers. A photo from photographer Bill Owens’ 1972 collection titled *Suburbia* exemplifies the culture of women who believed that they were defined by their relation to men and children. The image features a young woman standing in her living room with five other women sitting on the sofa, listening attentively and holding Tupperware order forms. The caption reads: “I enjoy giving a Tupperware party in my home. It gives me a chance to talk to my friends. But really, Tupperware is a homemaker’s dream, you save time and money because your food keeps longer.”¹⁵ The woman in the photo finds joy from parties centered around selling Tupperware, which are plastic storage containers used to preserve food. Describing Tupperware as a “homemaker’s dream” exemplifies how women’s ideas of happiness were limited to their gendered role as housewives. Women in suburbia were not given many opportunities to develop passions and hobbies that existed outside of their domestic bubble. Owens’ photo demonstrates how their social lives revolved around the lives of their children and the lives of their husbands, not a personal identity that existed outside of these relationships.

The societal pressures on women to fit the paradigm of suburban housewives resulted in

¹³Otis Dudley Duncan and Albert J Reiss Jr., “Suburbs and Urban Fringe,” in *The Suburban Community*, ed. William M. Dobriner (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1958), 48–61; Hugh A. Wilson, “The Family in Suburbia: From Tradition to Pluralism,” in *Suburbia Re-examined*, ed. Barbara M. Kelly (New York: Greenwood, 1989), 85–86; Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 256; Clayton Howard, “Building a ‘Family Friendly’ Metropolis: Sexuality, the State, and Postwar Housing Policy,” *Journal of Urban History* 39.5 (September 2013), 933–955, cited in: Nicolaidis and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

¹⁴Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 15.

¹⁵Bill Owens, *Suburbia: Photo 12*, 1972, Film Photography, <https://www.billowens.com/photographs-post/suburbia-12>.

an epidemic of women unfulfilled by their given roles. “Each suburban wife struggles with it alone,” Friedan argued. “As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – ‘Is this all?’”¹⁶ *The Feminine Mystique* opens with this haunting picture of women laying awake every night wondering if this is the scope of their existence. Thousands of suburban housewives worked for years to achieve their dream of being a perfect woman, only to find themselves disappointed with how menial and dull their lives were. The life they aspired to live since they were young girls was barely rewarding when their daily duties served little meaningful purpose. Women wondered if there was anything more to achieve, to strive for, or to hope for, once they had successfully become housewives. One woman interviewed in *The Feminine Mystique* confessed that, “I have no personality. I’m a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?”¹⁷ Friedan called it “the problem that has no name.”¹⁸ Women’s identities were confined to the word “housewife,” which proved demoralizing.

Women blamed themselves for their own malaise, and found consolation in the prescription drug, Valium. There was no space in society or in their home for women to discuss their disinterest, hopelessness, restlessness, or frustration. They asked themselves, “Other women were satisfied with their lives... What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor?”¹⁹ They thought themselves to be alone with their unhappiness, quietly wondering why they could not enjoy what their neighbors all seemed to

¹⁶Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 15.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 21.

¹⁸*Ibid*, 15.

¹⁹*Ibid*, 19.

love. For that reason, countless women turned to prescription medication to solve their ailments. Indeed, “Women as a group consumed twice as many minor tranquilizers as men, but studies showed that it was non-wage-earning women aged 35 and over who consumed the most.”²⁰ Suburban housewives were the primary consumer of drugs like Valium, which, being a tranquilizer, subdued their unpleasant feelings.

Valium’s profitability stemmed from F. Hoffmann-La Roche’s priority on aggressive advertising to unhappy women, thus exploiting the populace of suburban housewives. Valium was an exceptionally profitable product for Roche. It is reported that, “Valium was the most widely prescribed drug of any kind in the Western world between 1968 and 1981.”²¹ In 1978, the year of Valium’s sales peak, Roche sold nearly 2.3 billion tablets.²² This overwhelming success was a result of extensive marketing campaigns. Roche spent hundreds of millions of dollars marketing Valium and 98% of their sales income went towards profit and promotion.²³ For example, one advertisement depicted relatable photos of an ordinary young woman who struggled with low self esteem, among other issues. Valium was marketed as the solution, claiming that it “help[s] relieve the emotional ‘storms’ of psychoneurotic tension” and has “proven its value in the relief of psychoneurotic states.”²⁴ Roche saw the business opportunity in the suburban housewife populace and quickly capitalized upon it by marketing directly toward

²⁰Andrea Tone and Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, eds., *Medicating Modern America: Prescription Drugs in History* (New York University Press, 2007), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cate-ebooks/detail.action?docID=865938>, 172.

²¹Andrea Tone, “Listening to the Past: History, Psychiatry, and Anxiety,” *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 50 (June 2005): 378; “Valium Celebrates 40th, but not with a Bang,” *Times Colonist*, July 21, 2003: D4, cited in: Tone and Watkins, *Medicating Modern America*, 169.

²²Nicholas Bakalar, “A Host of Anxiety Drugs, Begat by Valium,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/nytimes/newspapers/host-anxiety-drugs-begat-valium/docview/432995069/sem-2?accountid=35217>.

²³John Pekkanen, “The Tranquilizer War: Controlling Librium and Valium,” *The New Republic*, July 19, 1975, 17– 19, cited in: Tone and Watkins, *Medicating Modern America*, 169.

²⁴“35, single, and psychoneurotic,” Valium advertisement, cited in: Joanna Moncrieff, “‘Angels and Demons’: The Politics of Psychoactive Drugs,” Joanna Moncrieff, April 22, 2014, <https://joannamoncrieff.com/2014/04/22/angels-and-demons-the-politics-of-psychoactive-drugs/>.

these women who were unsatisfied with their life. Roche sold Valium as the answer to dozens of emotional ailments, and by investing millions of dollars into sales, Roche ensured that every housewife and every doctor knew of Valium. Advertisements for the medication looked eerily similar to advertisements of common household products, exemplifying pharmaceutical companies' interest in grabbing the attention of consumers, not just the doctors prescribing Valium. Roche pushed Valium to be considered the first solution to emotional distress, thereby taking advantage of a vulnerable market of unfulfilled and lonely women looking for help. To the leadership of Roche, the hefty financial rewards of a highly prescribed drug overshadowed whether or not their tactics caused an epidemic of addiction.

Valium's highly-addictive properties were concealed by Roche to uphold the company's perception as a virtuous supplier of necessary medicine, instead of their economic motives. Despite being a highly addictive drug, Valium was widely prescribed in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, and in 1973,²⁵ the *Journal of the American Medical Association* even commended Valium because "tolerance, abuse, and abstinence are very rare."²⁶ A decade after Valium's FDA approval, doctors across the country still considered Valium to be safe, even when taken in excessive amounts. Few medical professionals or journals were concerned with tranquilizer dependency, or even prescription addiction.²⁷ This is a result of Roche's intentional efforts to "maintain the medicine's reputation in both medical and popular circles as safe, effective, and useful."²⁸ Roche was not interested in finding evidence that would prove their profitable drug to be unsafe, so they did not fund or conduct any careful scientific studies that investigated

²⁵Tone and Watkins, *Medicating Modern America*, 169.

²⁶Barry Blackwell, "Psychotropic Drugs in Use Today: The Role of Diazepam in Medical Practice," *JAMA*, September 24, 1973, 1640, cited in: David Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America: From Miltown to Prozac* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cate-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4398380>.

²⁷Tone and Watkins, *Medicating Modern America*, 169.

²⁸Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America*, 137.

Valium's withdrawal symptoms and ability to cause addiction. The few small studies that did uncover the truth did not gain widespread attention, even within the medical community. Roche preached to regulators, physicians, and consumers alike that Valium was not addictive, except to anyone who was naturally "dependence prone," and thus, their addiction was not Roche's responsibility.²⁹ One *Life* magazine headline, in response to a congressional investigation into the pharmaceutical industry, declared "Wonder-Drug Makers Get Handsome Profits from Their Captive Consumers."³⁰ Indeed, few Americans associated drug companies with the money-motives of other businesses, instead believing the altruistic rhetoric publicized by pharmaceutical companies, which made the companies seem like they were unselfishly supplying the country with the solutions to significant medical problems. Roche, among other pharmaceutical companies, were seen as the "noble wing of America's medical system,"³¹ because of their tactics to conceal the drug's dangers from the public eye.

The 1960s and 70s were the decades of a nationwide Valium addiction, which was exacerbated by doctors' quick prescriptions and a lack of understanding of the drug. In a 1979 *Washington Post* article, in which experts were consulted, one doctor explains how "We are increasingly beginning to admit patients who are on somewhere between 400 and 600 milligrams a day – which they get from having 8 or 10 doctors..."³² To the surprise of many, Valium's popularity was resulting in an epidemic of tranquilizer addicted Americans, who had been

²⁹Letter from Alfred F. Zobel to John H. Wood, August 24, 1979, reprinted and discussed in U.S. Senate, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research, *Use and Misuse of Benzodiazepines*, 96th Cong., 1st sess., September 10, 1979 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1980), 164– 72, cited in: Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America*, 109.

³⁰"Big Pill Bill to Swallow: The Wonder-Drug Makers Get Handsome Profits from Their Captive Consumers," *Life*, February 15, 1960, 97– 103, cited in: Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America*, 127.

³¹Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America: From Miltown to Prozac*, 128.

³²Sandy Rovner, "Healthtalk: The '70s Feel-Good Pills and the '80s Addicts," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 1979, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/11/30/healthtalk-the-70s-feel-good-pills-and-the-80s-addicts/fff30d24-0b73-4ecd-98ad-21b429633a47/>.

initially prescribed the drug by their doctor, and were now taking more than ten times the recommended dose.³³ The *Washington Post* article goes on to explain how many doctors, especially ones who had to meet with a certain number of patients in a small time frame, found that writing Valium prescriptions for stress-related disorders was a quick and effective fix. Indeed, Valium could be beneficial for many, but for others, it would become that “their drug problem was paradoxically worse than the problem we were trying to treat.”³⁴ While Valium was incorrectly considered non-addictive and safe even in excessive use, chronic overuse is now reported to have effects like intellectual impairment, hallucinations, and lack of muscle control, among other risky symptoms.³⁵ Furthermore, many Valium-users fell into a cycle of tolerance-withdrawal syndrome. They would use the drug to relieve their emotional distress, but the more they used, their bodies built up a tolerance for the drug, and they would inevitably experience withdrawal symptoms like pain and muscle spasms. Doctors would instead attribute these symptoms to a re-emergence of the original problem and prescribe their patient more Valium, overlooking the substance abuse.³⁶ Few doctors or consumers expected addiction from Valium, so when abuse quickly occurred, there were devastating consequences.

The nationwide housewife tranquilizer addiction marked a shift in Americans’ relationships with drugs, in which drug abuse was no longer confined to class. In a 1971 Senate hearing, President Richard Nixon said to the American Medical Association that, “We used to say [that drug abuse] is a ghetto problem or it is a black problem... But today it has moved from the ghetto to the suburbs, from the poor to the upper middle class.”³⁷ Nixon acknowledged an

³³“Diazepam (Oral Route),” Mayo Clinic, May 2, 2024, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/drugs-supplements/diazepam-oral-route/description/drg-20072333>.

³⁴Rovner, “Healthtalk: The ’70s Feel-Good Pills and the ’80s Addicts.”

³⁵“Diazepam.”

³⁶Rovner, “Healthtalk: The ’70s Feel-Good Pills and the ’80s Addicts.”

³⁷U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Small Business, Subcommittee on Monopoly (1971), *Advertising of Proprietary Medicines, Part 2: Mood Drugs (Sedatives, Tranquilizers, and Stimulants)*, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, DC GPO, 1971), cited in: Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America*, 133.

important transformation in the nation's culture, due to the increasing usage of prescription medication. There was, and even continues to be, a longstanding association between illegal activity and marginalized groups like immigrants, nonwhites, and the urban poor. Indeed, anti-drug rhetoric had been used by suburbanites to prevent, what they considered to be, the encroachment of dangerous populations on their protected paradise.³⁸ However, Valium usage and abuse was almost entirely confined to the white, upper-middle class, or the residents of America's expansive suburban population. This is on account of Valium being a legal, prescription medication, unlike the illegal substances being pushed in city streets. The average Valium addict could be your unassuming neighbor, and their "dealers" were respected medical authorities. America had not predicted that evils like addiction could infiltrate their idealistic American dream, but in truth, Valium's heyday brought drug abuse to suburban populations, reflecting a complicated dynamic with medication for years to come.

Rapid suburbanization in a post-WWII America coincided with a reemergence of strict gender roles. The suburban housewife became the dream of girls across the country, yet this role proved unfulfilling for many. Housewives felt trapped and distraught, even in their homogenous suburban "paradise," because their identities were confined to their role as mother and homemaker. Their distress, which cycled into shame, was fertile ground for addiction to prescription medication like Valium. F Hoffmann-La Roche took advantage of millions by aggressively advertising to unhappy women and marketing their product as safe, despite its highly-addictive properties. But the real problem is the circumstances that drove housewives to seek respite from their unfulfilling lives. Valium sedated their unpleasant feelings and provided an escape from the monotony of cleaning houses and feeding children, without an outlet for self expression. Suburbia was fertile ground for drug addiction, especially one funded by

³⁸Herzberg, *Happy Pills in America*, 123.

pharmaceutical companies like Roche who recognized the profit potential of depressed housewives. Women took Valium to cope with their pain instead of confronting what hindered them. But in reality, confronting society is easier said than done.

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