

# The Real *Limitless* Drug Isn't Just for Lifhackers Anymore

**Modafinil's moment.**

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(Photo: Trunk Archive)

**I**t took Peter Borden a while to come around to modafinil. He never takes prescription drugs. He doesn't drink to excess. He's into acupuncture and alternative medicine. But he was working two jobs—by day, he does quantitative analysis and project management for a venture-capital-backed B2B start-up; by night, he's developing a proprietary high-frequency trading system for a Wall Street start-up of his own—and what he needed was more time to work.

So a few months ago, Borden ordered a three-week supply by mail. ("It was a piece of cake," he says.) He popped his first pill—"the maximum suggested dose"—as soon as the package arrived, and within a few hours he started feeling a pleasant fuzziness. "Not fuzzy-headed," he says, "but crisp. A crisp softness to it." Soon he was experiencing a level of concentration he'd never imagined. "My senses sort of shifted to the visual, and my auditory sense went down. Sounds didn't even register. It was like walking around on a winter day when it just snowed. It was very easy to stay visually focused."

Next came a head rush. "I sensed it was blood actually moving to the optic nerve. Your eyes start to feel very sort of engorged, and your awareness comes to the front of your face, which is kind of a freaky sensation. I would describe it as being very much like Adderall, but without the speediness."

Tasks that were usually soul-crushing now had his undivided attention. He spent hours fine-tuning ad campaigns for his new business, and his output wasn't just faster and longer—it was better. "I didn't take as many breaks; I didn't get as frustrated; the stuff came out with fewer errors," he says. "I never felt, *Oh, let's just get it done*. I polished things." As long as he kept taking the pill, his focus never wavered. "Time took on an entirely different sort of quality." He was even happier. "There were some very potent anti-anxiety effects. Which was strange. I didn't think I was an anxious person, but I guess I was."

Modafinil, which is marketed as Provigil in the United States, was first approved by the FDA in 1998 for the treatment of narcolepsy, but since then it's become better known as a nootropic, a "smart drug," especially among entrepreneurs. More recently, it has attracted traders like Borden who don't just need a pick-me-up to get through a deadline; they need to be *on*, without a break, for months, even years at a time.

### **Modafinil Is Like...**

*Reviews From Online Commenters*

"A Prius compared to a Ferrari ... profound yet at the same time subtle and not overwhelming."

"A digital camera that took perfectly recognizable pictures, but now had a few more megapixels."

"A borderline anxiety attack."

And that's modafinil's reputation. It is rumored to be the model for the fictional pills in the movie *Limitless* that allowed Bradley Cooper's character to use 100 percent of his brain. Timothy Ferriss, author of the best-selling *The 4-Hour Work Week*, [recently dished](#) about its effects with modafinil fan Joe Rogan, the former host of *Fear Factor*, on Rogan's popular podcast. Probably its biggest booster is Dave Asprey, founder of the Bulletproof Executive [web forum](#), where he blogged about the drug's powers (headline: "[Why You Are Suffering From a Modafinil Deficiency](#)"). Last summer, ABC News did a segment on Asprey in which he compared taking it to the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where everything blossoms from black-and-white to color.

Last month, modafinil's penetration into the culture was confirmed by the American Medical Association's journal *Internal Medicine*, which published a University of California, San Francisco, study reporting that U.S. prescriptions increased almost tenfold over the past decade. Far and away, most of those were for off-label use.

In New York, Borden is hearing more chatter about it among traders and hedge-funders, though they don't tend to boast about it in the same way as the tech guys. "There's something, I think, about guys who write code for a living that makes them very interested in hacking things—finding shortcuts, stuff like that," he says. "Whereas with guys on Wall Street, it's more testosterone-fueled; it's more just power through it." In a conversation on WallStreetOasis.com titled "Viagra for the Brain," one commenter gushed, "This *is not like caffeine* or *5 Hour Energy*. This is the big leagues."

Unlike Ritalin or Adderall, modafinil isn't an amphetamine and doesn't flood the body with dopamine in the same way. For this reason, scientists originally believed it to be non-habit-forming, though some are beginning to doubt this claim. Users on message boards talk about how modafinil doesn't so much speed them up as clear their minds. "Most of the drugs that people do in our society are things like alcohol that make you stupider instead of smarter," mobile-software entrepreneur Jesse Lawler said in a [recent podcast](#) about modafinil for his website [SmartDrugSmarts.com](#).

The entrepreneur Daniel Tenner used modafinil to launch his first company while still working for the consulting firm Accenture. "Every day," he wrote on [swombat.com](#), a site for entrepreneurs, "I would sleep at 11 p.m. sharp. I would then wake up at 4 a.m., work until 7 a.m., then nap for an hour before going to work at my day job. I then also worked weekends."

Of course, its ascendancy is also cause for some alarm. No scientist has conducted a study of its long-term effects on healthy brains yet. At the very least, doctors have warned that modafinil can bring about sleep deprivation (or, in the words of the *Internal Medicine* paper, "hypersensitivity reactions and neuropsychiatric adverse effects"). The modafinil moment has even prompted a secondary conversation among sociologists and economists about the anxiety of staying ahead in today's competitive economy, and microeconomic predictions about a future in which everyone sleeps less: fewer mattress sales, more dollars spent at bars and nightclubs, more sex, and more children.

For Borden, life on modafinil really did feel like a real-life (if somewhat toned-down) *Limitless*. Things get hairy for the character in the movie—there's addiction and withdrawal and tragedy before the tidy Hollywood ending. The first downside Borden noticed was in line with the film: He couldn't drink. "I went out for a drink, and then I had another drink. And because I was so energized and focused, I got drunk faster. It kind of freaked me out, because time would sort of fly by. I'd be here, and then I'd be here. Almost like mini-blackouts. I very quickly cut out alcohol."

Then he ran into an even bigger problem: Skip a dose, and there would be hell to pay. "I really would feel it. It was sort of like being thrust into dirty, messy reality, as opposed to a clean, neatly organized place. It was like crashing, and I actually found what would happen is the anxiety that got dialed down on the way in, when you were coming off it, all of a sudden you went through the reverse. So I got incredibly anxious. Eventually that concerned me." He stopped after three weeks. He says he's more comfortable trying to get the same effect through meditation and, of all things, getting a good night's sleep. He remains a little in awe of the pill, though. "It's a great hack."

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