

rehab the same month after being arrested for trying to purchase

Xanax with a fraudulent prescription.

Not everyone from these social circles thinks prescription-pill

swapping is chic, however.

A few days after hosting a recent dinner party at her Manhat-

tan apartment, Maria Rita Caso, a 40-year-old music agent,

called some of her guests "drug-addict degenerates."

Caso, a former Studio 54 girl who's been sober for more than

eight years (after checking in to the Betty Ford Center for

cocaine addiction), recalls brewing coffee in the kitchen when a

banker mentioned his addiction to Xanax, which his doctor had

given him. Caso says, "Everyone immediately had their pills on

the table, playing, 'I'll give you three of these for one of those,'

and saying, 'I know a psychiatrist who'll give you a prescription.'

I had no idea there's a whole cul-

ture of people testing out pre-

scription drugs."

Caso isn't the only one con-

cerned about the prescription-

pill-swapping phenomenon. Doc-

tors caution that you can

become physically or emotional-

ly dependent or addicted. You

might also find that a higher

dosage is required to produce a

similar initial effect. If you overdose, the result could be fatal.

Mixing drugs together—or with certain "ordinary" over-the-

counter medications, or with alcohol—is even more dangerous

and can lead to severe respiratory depression, coma, or death.

Clearly, though, many people aren't heeding this warning. In

fact, the accessory du jour is a sexy compact pill case. Helmut

Lang recently introduced a metal and leather pillbox (\$168 at

Barneys), and Felissimo, an upscale Manhattan boutique, keeps

selling out of its Maurizio Galante capsule cases. The typical

buyer? According to Ana Schutz, design associate at Felissimo,

"Women who've just come from shopping at Bergdorfs. They're

wearing low-slung jeans and slittos. And they're always carry-

ing expensive purses."

One public-relations executive happily tours the so-called

perks of pill popping: "Drink a bottle of wine and you might as

well eat a piece of cheesecake. Pills give a low-cal high." Another

PR exec adds: "If you're drinking alcohol, you're just some

boozy broad. But when you add something like pills, there is a

mystique. Like the Warhol diaries. Or Edie Sedgwick."

Pill swapping seems to be extending even beyond parties and

into the dating sphere. One 27-year-old who works in fashion

says that after recently seeing her down some Xanax with a

friend over dinner at Mr. Chow, a prospective beau took the hint:

"He brought me to the New York Phittamonic at Lincoln Center

the next week and said, 'Guess what I've got?' and then pulled

out a bottle of Z's [Xanax tablets] that he got from a cousin, a

doctor. Years ago, a man showed up for a date with a corsage.

Now he shows up with pills." ■

"Drink wine and you might as well eat cheesecake. Pills give a low-cal high," says one PR exec.

Addition Recovery in Delray Beach, Florida.

The statistics seem to support this. According to data collect-

ed by NDC Health, a health-care information-services company,

new prescriptions for antianxiety medication jumped 7.9 percent

nationwide—more than 25 percent in New York City—in Sep-

tember. Likewise, new prescriptions for sleep aids rose 7.5 per-

cent nationally and 27.5 percent in New York City in the month

of the terrorist attacks.

What's also different, says Murray Jonas, M.D., a New York

City psychiatrist, is that "even people who in the past had been

reluctant to take pills have sought them," another sign the num-

ber of users is up.

In addition, prescription pills are popular now because, even

without a doctor's note, access is increasing. Restocking trips

are often taken to Mexico,

where the black market contin-

ues to grow. It's estimated that

Tijuana alone has about 1700

pharmacies—more than three

times the number that existed

five years ago—many of which

sell controlled substances ille-

gally over the counter. And in

some instances, doctors in

Mexico sell prescriptions.

These drugs are also appealing because they're relatively

cheap. If you have a prescription and health insurance, you can

get a bottle practically for free. On the black market, they're less

costly than "street" drugs. For example, the cost of an evening's

worth of cocaine or heroin can run into the hundreds of dollars,

whereas in Miami, dealers sell Vicodin, Valium, Xanax, and oxy-

codone, a painkiller often given to cancer patients, for as little as

three to four dollars a pill.

Plus, these drugs are easy to take. Bryan says: "You don't

have to use a needle, sniff it, or take it in a bathroom stall so no

one sees you."

Perhaps most disconcerting is that some people now use

prescription medications because they incorrectly think they're

completely safe, unlike cocaine or heroin or ecstasy. As Emily

Dougherty, a 28-year-old editor who's seen her share of pill

swapping, summarizes: "Entry-level relaxants are viewed like

Tylenol PM. No one thinks you might OD or become addicted.

The perception is they won't ruin your life."

Regardless of the reason, communal pill culture has become

part of socialization at parties where food, alcohol, and vials are

sampled freely. The trend is predominant in New York and Los

Angeles but reaches beyond the two cities. In suburban

Philadelphia, Richard G. Paolino, an osteopath, was scheduled

to go on trial this April after allegedly dispensing more than

80,000 doses of OxyContin and Xanax for street use. The trend

has also infiltrated celebrity culture. Winona Ryder was charged

in February with unauthorized possession of oxycodone, and

Noelle Bush, the daughter of Florida governor Jeb Bush, entered