

SUBSTANCES AS STRESS RELIEVERS: DECONSTRUCTING ADVERTISEMENTS

Substances—such as food, alcohol & tobacco—are frequently advertised as stress relievers. When we internalize and act on these messages, unhealthy (and potentially deadly) addictions can result. The following activity will help students to:

- » recognize that products are frequently offered as antidotes to stressful situations;
- » think critically about the reality of relieving stress and/or anxiety with products;
- » question the profit-making motives of advertisers and compare and contrast their messages about stress relief with those put forth by medical and health professionals; and
- » explore alternative, non-materialistic methods of responding to stress.

ADVERTISING FOOD

*Look at **Handout 1**, an advertisement for Lifesaver's Crème Savers, and answer the following questions:*

1. Examine the language used in this ad. What is it saying? What is it implying?
2. Examine the colors and layout of the ad. What feelings does it create? How are these feelings associated with the product being sold?
3. What is promised or offered by the ad?
4. Who might this ad appeal to? Who do you think the ad is targeting?
5. In reality, the excessive intake of sugar results in a sudden drop in energy and fatigue. It has also been determined that the increase of sugar in the bloodstream causes a sharp rise in adrenaline, the “fight or flight” hormone, which increases the body’s level of stress, (*Sweet and Dangerous*, Dr. John Yudkin, 1972). This ad offers relaxation, when in reality, the ingredients being advertised will have the opposite effect on a body. How do you respond to this contradiction?
6. What are some negative effects of turning to sugar when you are stressed or tired?
7. What other foods have you seen advertised as a relief from stress or as offering to alter your emotional state? How has this use of food become normalized in the culture? Discuss your opinions about food taking on this role. Are there circumstances when this is okay? When is it not okay? How do we know the difference? How do advertisements, such as this one, which are seemingly harmless when standing alone, contribute to a climate of confusion about the appropriate role of food?

ADVERTISING CIGARETTES

*Look at **Handout 2**, an advertisement for Virginia Slims.*

1. Examine the language used in this ad. What is it saying? What is it implying?
2. Examine the colors and layout of the ad. What feelings does it create? How are these feelings associated with the product being sold?
3. What is promised or offered by the ad?

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4. Who might this ad appeal to? Who do you think the ad is targeting?
5. Most people who smoke become addicted and increase their tobacco intake over time. If a person only grants him or herself time alone, away from the hectic pace of everyday life, when s/he smokes a cigarette, what kind of habit is being established? What is the reality of smoking in this way versus the story that this ad tells? Consider the differences between having the 'freedom to be alone' and the 'need to smoke a cigarette'—how does this ad confuse these states of being? Does it exploit the 'freedom to be alone'? Explain.
6. What are some negative effects of turning to cigarettes when you are stressed or need time alone?
7. Look at other cigarette ads. In what ways do they associate relaxation, fun, or escape with their product? Discuss your opinions about tobacco being sold in this way.

ALCOHOL ADVERTISING

Look at **Handout 3**, an advertisement for Miller Lite, and answer the following questions:

1. Examine the language used in this ad. What is it saying? What is it implying?
2. Examine the colors and layout of the ad. What feelings does it create? How are these feelings associated with the product being sold?
3. What is promised or offered by the ad?
4. Who might this ad appeal to? Who do you think the ad is targeting?
5. In our culture, alcohol is often associated with fun and letting down. Drinking is a way of giving oneself permission to relax and enjoy. As a chemical, alcohol is a depressant; so, physically, it does indeed have the immediate effect of slowing down the system. However, dependency on alcohol often begins when a person turns to it in order to escape the stress of life. What is your opinion of the alcohol industry advertising its products in the very way that contributes to a serious and destructive addiction?
6. What are some negative effects of turning to alcohol when you are stressed?
7. Look at other alcohol ads. In what ways do they associate fun, relaxation, and escape with their product? Discuss your opinions about alcohol being sold in this way.

PROFIT-DRIVEN INDUSTRIES & HEALTH

The food, tobacco, and alcohol industries are multi-billion-dollar-a-year industries. They are investing large amounts of money to get customers. It is important to recognize how much effort they put into getting people to use their products and how their messages contrast with the messages we get from medical and health professionals.

Statistics:

- » Marion Nestle, chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University, estimates that \$13 billion a year is spent marketing to American children—by food and drink industries alone. Food advertising makes up about half of all advertising aimed at kids, (*The Food Institute Report, April 15, 2002*).
- » Advertising and promotional expenditures for cigarettes were \$11.22 billion in 2001, up 17 percent from 2000 and the most ever reported to the FTC, (*2003 Federal Trade Commission Cigarette Report*).
- » \$1.9 billion was spent on alcohol advertising in measured media (television, radio, print, outdoor, major newspapers and Sunday supplements) in 2002, (*Federal Trade Commission, Self-Regulation in the Alcohol Industry, Appendix B: Alcohol Advertising Expenditures, iii*).

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Questions for discussion:

» When industries spend large amounts of money on advertising (making their products attractive and glamorous), how does it make it difficult for health professionals to get out their messages?

» Which messages are more appealing—the messages that tell you that drinking alcohol is fun and ‘cool’ and popular, or the messages from health professionals warning you about the risks and dangers of drinking to excess?

» It is always important to take into consideration who is giving you information and what they’re motive is.

a. Look again at your advertisements. In each case, who is giving you the information? What is their motive? What do they care about?

b. Look at the following weblinks:

■ familydoctor.org/273.xml

■ www.montana.edu/wwwpb/home/junk.html

■ www.cdc.gov/tobacco/educational_materials/yuthfax1.htm

In each of these articles, who is giving you the information? What is their motive? What do they care about?

c. Compare and contrast your answers to **a** and **b** above. Discuss.

ALTERNATIVE WAYS FOR DEALING WITH STRESS

When we are in stressful situations, our bodies usually respond with feelings of anxiety and/or nervousness. These feelings help us kick into overdrive, release adrenaline, and take care of the situation at hand. However, when we don’t have healthy coping mechanisms, stress, and the accompanying feelings, can become overwhelming—and we can become incapacitated rather than moved to action. Once we become aware that there are industries seeking to profit from our anxieties, it is important for us to devise personal plans for coping with stress.

1. Make a list of as many activities (at least 20) as you can think of that calm you down and help you relax. While you might include “watching movies,” “listening to the radio,” and “surfing the Internet” on your list, include at least 10 activities that are not media-linked.

2. As a class, create a master list of “Ways to Deal With Stress.”

3. Create a Personal Stress Reduction and Coping Plan:

Answer the following two questions:

» In order to reduce stress in my life, I can:

» When I am under stress, to help myself cope, I can:

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

» www.focusas.com/Stress.html

» Some circumstances are more stressful than any one person can be expected to cope with on their own. The following handout gives information about dealing with particularly traumatic situations—the death of a loved one, divorce, sexual assault, violence, etc.: www.naspcenter.org/safe_schools/trauma.html (scroll down for information meant specifically for teenagers).

HANDOUT 1



*Calming,
Soothing,
Relaxing.*

*Perhaps that look on your face
has something to do
with what's in your mouth.*

*The Creamiest,
Dreamiest
Life Savers Yet.*

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CANDYSTAND.com

HANDOUT 2

Sometimes I Need A Minute To Catch up with Myself.

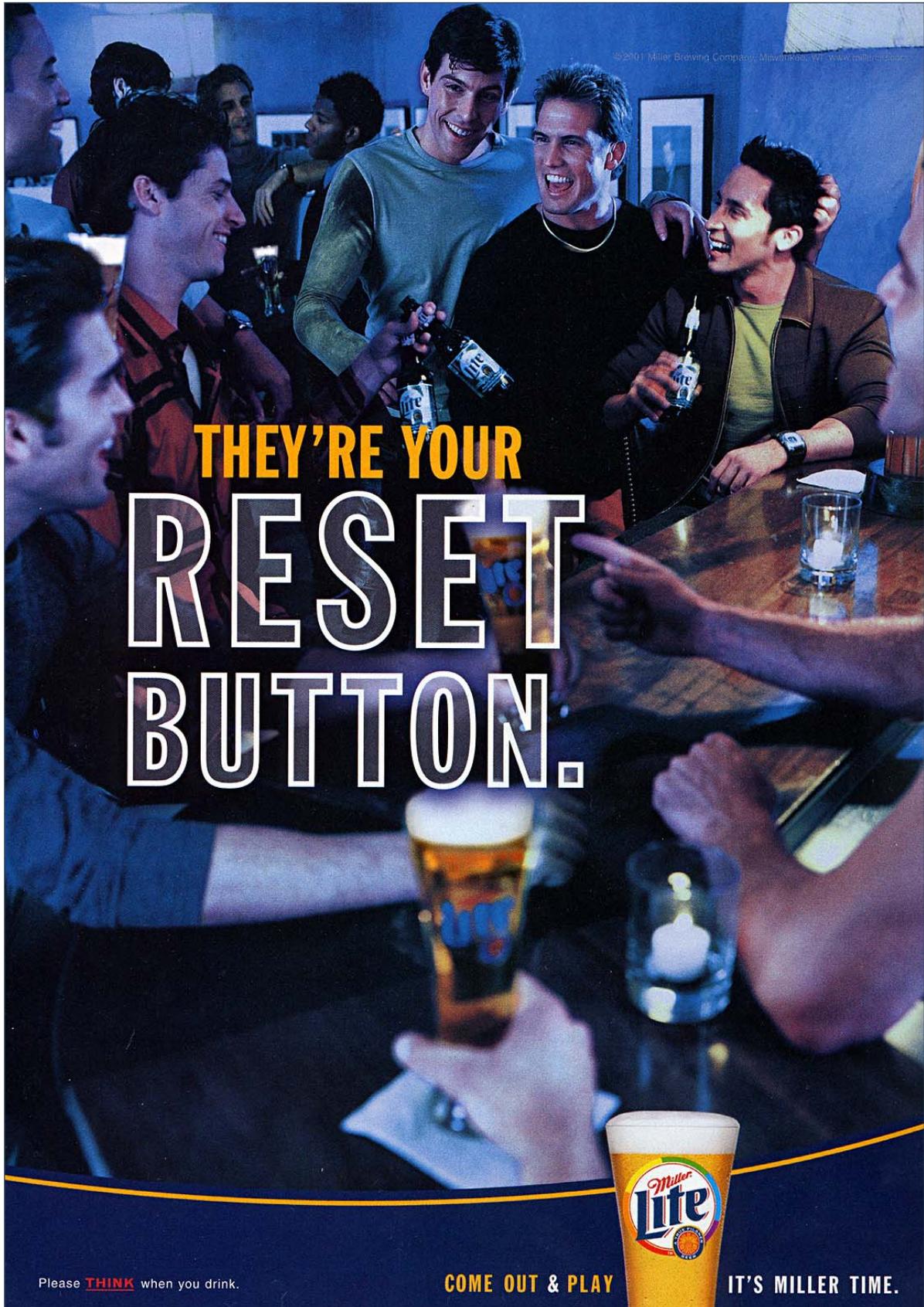
VIRGINIA SLIMS

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Cigarette Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide.

9 mg "tar," 0.7 g nicotine av. per cigarette by FTC method.
Does not contain "tar" and nicotine free tobacco, will vary depending on how you smoke it. For cigarette tar and nicotine information, visit www.philipmorrisusa.com or call 1-877-PMUSAWEB.

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HANDOUT 3



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**THEY'RE YOUR
RESET
BUTTON.**

Please **THINK** when you drink.

COME OUT & PLAY

IT'S MILLER TIME.

