

Addiction: A Community Crisis

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Educational Objectives

1. Increase participant knowledge about substance abuse as a disease.
2. Increase participant knowledge about ways to proactively decrease risk for developing substance abuse issues.
3. Provide participants with valuable community resource information to advocate for drug-free communities.

Opioids – a class of drugs that include prescription pain medications and heroin – were involved in 28,648 U.S. deaths in 2014 according to the Centers for Disease Control. West Virginia has one of the highest opioid prescription rates with an average of 138 prescriptions written for every adult.

These statistics are alarming and dangerous. Communities

plagued by substance abuse are filled with feelings of fear, frustration and even hopelessness. However, there is hope for decreasing the number of individuals who suffer from addiction and rebuilding safer communities.

Addiction Is A Disease

Substance abuse is an epidemic. Individuals from every socioeconomic background, education level and ethnicity are impacted by addiction. Addiction is a disease. It robs the person battling the disease, as well as their loved ones and the communities in which they live, and often leaves everyone feeling hopeless.

A common misconception exists that those with drug addiction are morally flawed, weak individuals who choose to spend their day chasing the next high and are not productive members of society. Nothing could be further from the truth. The National Institute on Drug Abuse defines addiction as a chronic, often relapsing brain disease that causes compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences to the addicted individual and to those around him or her.

Addiction is complex. Studies show that when the brain experiences pleasure the chemical dopamine triggers the reward center in the brain. This “feel good” sensation created by the release of dopamine



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trains the brain to repeat the behavior responsible to repeat the pleasurable feelings. In the case of opioid abuse, both legal (prescription) and illegal, brain receptors become overloaded with dopamine each time the person uses the drug. Continued opioid use causes changes in how the brain receives and communicates messages. Over time, the brain has sensory overload. It has to compensate for the surge of dopamine in one of two ways. The brain reacts to the overstimulation from opioid drug use by either decreasing the amount of dopamine released or by activating fewer reward receptors. This adaptation leads to an increase in the amount of opiates needed to feel the same amount of pleasure. This is called drug tolerance. The changes to the brain's chemistry combined with trying to avoid drug withdrawal symptoms makes it difficult for the drug user to resist the urge to use drugs regardless of consequence. This is how the vicious cycle of addiction begins.

Addiction Risk Factors

As with other diseases (such as diabetes and heart disease), there are risk factors that make an individual more susceptible to developing addiction in their lifetime. Being aware of the risk factors allows individuals to proactively take steps to reduce risk. Risk factors include environment, social pressure, mental illness and age.

Environment – Studies show that adolescents who spend significant time in environments where drug use is acceptable are less likely to see drug use as life-threatening and will experiment with drugs at an earlier age.

Individuals exposed to environments where abuse (such as sexual, physical or verbal) is present are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors and experiment with drugs.

Social Pressure – Many adolescents begin experimenting with drugs to be liked. Adolescents who experiment with drugs before age 18 are more likely to develop an addiction, compared to peers who do not experiment with drugs until after age 18. This could be due to the fact that the adolescent brain hasn't fully developed. Drug use before the complete development of cognitive abilities can negatively affect a person's ability to make good decisions. Traumatic or stressful life events including loss of a loved one or job also increase an individual's chances of developing substance abuse issues or relapsing.

Mental Illness – Substance abuse often co-exists with mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression. Drug use begins as a way to cope with the symptoms of the disorder. Ultimately, the symptoms of the mental illness are magnified once the drug wears off. This cycle of mental illness and substance abuse creates a volatile environment.

Age – Adults over the age of 55 have an increased risk of abusing drugs. This is mainly because older adults have experienced depression associated with traumatic life events, such as death of a spouse or loss of health. Studies show that women are more likely to abuse drugs, while men are more likely to abuse alcohol.

What Can Communities Do?

While addiction wreaks havoc, communities do not have to feel helpless. Prevention and recovery strategies are key in the fight against substance abuse. First, know the warning signs. Signs and symptoms of substance abuse are varied. If your loved one displays any of the following signs, they may have a problem with substance abuse.

Physical

- Blood-shot eyes
- Blank stares
- Slurred speech
- Inability to hold balance
- Unkempt appearance
- Unexplained sores on face and body



Behavioral

- Fighting
- Decreased work performance
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Suddenly withdrawn or secretive
- Change in friends
- Missing valuables, money or prescription drugs
- Constant borrowing of money
- Loss of home or vehicle

Psychological

- Mood swings
- Personality change
- Paranoid
- Hallucinations

The Road to Recovery

If you suspect someone may be suffering from addiction there are ways to help them get on the road to recovery.

- **Understand** that the addicted person cannot voluntarily stop using drugs immediately. The science of addiction diminishes the ability to resist drugs; however, it is possible to successfully recover from substance abuse through intensive therapy. The most successful recovery programs include medicine to wean the addicted person off of drugs along with psychological and behavioral therapy.
 - Visit Department on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse-Department of Health and Human Resources – State of West Virginia at www.dhhr.wv.gov and click on the Find Services Near You link for resources in your county.
- **Seek** professional help.
 - Call 1-800-662-HELP or visit www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov to locate a recovery program near you.
- **Dispose** of unwanted or unused prescription drugs.
 - Visit the Drug Enforcement Agency website at www.dea.gov to locate a drug disposal center near you. Learn how to properly dispose of unused or unwanted medications in your home.
 - Learn about Drug Take-Back Day in your community by visiting www.dea.gov.

- **Share knowledge** about addiction with community members. As communities fight the war against drugs, knowledge of the science of addiction is very important. If you educate yourself and your neighbors about the risk factors and debunk the myths surrounding addiction, you and your community can make real progress toward being drug-free.
- **Advocate** for a drug-free community.
 - Host a recovery support group at your church or civic organization headquarters.
 - Host a community showing of the film, “The Anonymous People.” For more information visit the website manyfaces1voice.org.
 - Join the governor’s initiative on substance abuse. For more information, visit www.wvsubstancefree.org.
 - Form or join a substance abuse prevention coalition in your community.
- **Support** those struggling with addiction. Abusers often deal with feelings of shame and hopelessness. It is important for them to be surrounded with people who believe in their ability to achieve long-term recovery. It is equally important for the people who are offering support to remember that you neither created their addiction, nor can you cure it.

Visit www.familiesagainstnarcotics.org for signs of addiction enabling and how to stop those behaviors.

For more information on opioid use and treatment options visit www.hhs.gov/opioids.



Activity: True or False

1. More Americans die each year from drug overdoses than car accidents. (*True*)
2. Substance abuse and addiction are caused when an individual has low moral standards. (*False, Addiction is similar to other diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. While an individual has risk factors that makes them more likely to abuse substances, they do not always develop the disease.*)
3. Naloxone is the drug approved by the FDA to treat suspected opioid overdose. (*True*)

Word Search Key

B	A	G	E	P	D	R	U	G	B	V	S
W	D	G	I	A	M	E	Y	T	N	U	X
Q	D	M	M	D	O	P	A	M	I	N	E
G	I	M	T	R	E	C	O	V	E	R	Y
J	C	A	K	E	G	B	P	C	T	J	W
A	T	A	L	M	C	R	I	R	F	C	H
D	I	S	E	A	S	E	O	I	Q	H	V
E	O	V	B	N	L	D	I	I	P	A	T
N	N	O	F	W	A	Z	D	D	O	P	U
C	O	M	M	U	N	I	T	Y	D	S	I

Addiction	Disease	Opioid
Community	Dopamine	Recovery
DEA	Drug	

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