

Tools for Addressing Opioid Addiction with Teens & Families

It is crucial to maintain a supportive and understanding environment that will allow for non-judgmental and open discussions. To that end, and in cooperation with the Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries, the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington has generated a few tools to assist those responsible for interacting and supervising young adults who are dealing with addiction or have a loved one facing addiction.

The below statistics present the pervasiveness of the opioid epidemic, as well as the large-scale effect on the community. One of the biggest concerns now is the influx of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl from China, where there is no quality control. Fentanyl can be so potent that police officers have accidentally overdosed during drug raids by handling bags of pure fentanyl.

Opioid Statistics

- 61.5% of teenagers said they've used prescription (Rx) painkillers they got from a friend or family member¹
- 7 out of 10 teen non-medical users combine Rx opioids with other substances²
- Teens who reported co-ingestion of Rx opioids with other drugs were²:
 - 8x more likely to report abusing marijuana
 - 4x more likely to report being drunk more than 10 times
- Only 1/3 of parents discuss with their children the risks of using alcohol, illicit and prescription drugs³
- In 2016, 46 died every day from opioid-related drug overdoses⁴
- In 2018, synthetic opioids (e.g. fentanyl) were involved in nearly 50% of opioid-related deaths, up from 14% in 2010⁵

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Surveys on Drug Use and Health (NSDUHs), 2013 and 2014
2. McCabe et al, Drug Alc. Dep., 2012
3. Lord, S., & Marsch, L. (2011). Emerging Trends and Innovations in the Identification and Management of Drug Use among Adolescents and Young Adults. *Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews*, 22(3), 649–xiv.
4. Seth P, Rudd RA, Noonan RK, Haegerich. Quantifying the Epidemic of Prescription Opioid Overdose Deaths. *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 4 (April 1, 2018): pp. 500-502.
5. NIH: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/infographics/fentanyl-other-synthetic-opioids-drug-overdose-deaths>

Book Suggestions

- *Hijacked Brains: The Experience and Science of Chronic Addiction* by Henrieta Robin Barnes, MD
- *Addict in the Family: Stories of Loss, Hope, and Recovery* by Beverly Conyers

What Are Opioids?

Opioids are narcotic drugs, such as morphine, that are derived from the opium poppy. They are highly addictive and are often used for the treatment of pain. These drugs work via the central nervous system by binding to opioid receptors and reducing the number of pain signals or messages that are sent to the brain. Common types of synthetic opioids include prescription drugs such as codeine, oxycodone (OxyContin), and Vicodin. Heroin, an illegal drug, is also an opioid.

What Is Addiction?

Because opioids have an extremely high risk of causing addiction, it is important to understand what addiction is. Addiction is a powerful and abnormal craving for a substance. The urge to use the drug is so powerful that you don't care about the negative impact that pursuit of the substance may have on your life. When a person has an opioid addiction, its use changes the brain in a way that makes them want to continue experiencing its pleasurable effects. When a person is addicted to opioids, they might display signs and symptoms such as a lack of coordination, slurred speech, mood swings, nausea and/or vomiting, or feeling high or depressed.

Signs of Overdose

Overdose is a serious problem for people who illegally use opioids. Accidental overdoses should be taken seriously, as they can result in death. If you suspect that a friend is suffering from an overdose, you must be able to recognize the symptoms. These symptoms often include vomiting, an erratic pulse, and erratic breathing. A person who has overdosed on opioids may be clammy to the touch or pale and have a blue or purplish tint to their lips and the beds of their fingernails. They may go limp, and their pupils will be small and constricted. Another obvious sign of overdose is that they become unresponsive and may not be breathing or have a detectable pulse at all.

Causes of Addiction

There are several causes of opioid addiction. When a person uses an opioid that has not been prescribed specifically for them or they begin to use more than the dose prescribed, they are more likely to develop an addiction. A person may also begin to build up a tolerance to the specific opioid that is being used, which also leads to addiction. This happens when a person takes the opioid so frequently that they grow accustomed to its effects, so more of the drug must be taken to achieve the same results.

Source: "[Preventing Opioid Addiction for Teens](#)"

Signs and Symptoms of Addiction

To aid those suffering from addiction or who have a loved one suffering from addiction it is imperative that youth leaders are maintaining a safe and supportive environment. This page is designed to provide you with information which may indicate behaviors and warning signs of those who are suffering from drug addiction or abuse. It is important to note that possessing one or more of these warning signs does not mean that a teen is a drug addict, but one should make note of these signs. Some concerning behaviors include:

- Constricted pupils
- Social withdrawal, isolation
- Rapidly changing grades
- Sudden weight loss or weight gain
- Significant changes to sleep patterns
- Unexplained giggling, clumsiness and lack of coordination
- Breaking curfew
- Confusion
- Avoiding eye contact
- Poor concentration
- Making excuses to avoid family functions
- Goes out every night, even during the school week
- Sudden change in friends
- Abandoning social activities
- Items or money gone missing
- Extra pill bottles turning up in the trash

What Next?

- First, discuss your concerns with the individual. Make sure you are coming from a place of genuine concern and empathy. Plan a way to approach them in a constructive and non-confrontational manner.
- Reach out to a guardian or a specialist. Parent support specialists are also available to listen, answer questions, and help create a plan to address a young adult's substance abuse.

Resources

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Hotline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- Text "ABOVE" to 741-741 for 24/7, anonymous, free crisis counseling via the Crisis Text Hotline
- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIH) Guide for Teens and Young Adults "What to do if you have a problem with Drugs": <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/treatment/what-to-do-if-you-have-problem-drugs-teens-young-adults>

Group Activity

(If any student indicates a struggle with addiction or a family member's struggle with addiction, make sure to talk individually after the discussion, refer him or her to a school public health counselor or encourage the student to call the free, confidential, 24/7 information service for individuals, friends, and family who are worried about a substance use disorder. 1-800-662-HELP)

As a group, start off by asking the young adults or teens what they know about the opioid epidemic. They may have some preconceived notions.

Watch Amy's Story (30 sec) on <http://opioids.thetruth.com/o/home>

There are also Chris', Joe's and Kyle's story to watch as well. All videos are 30 seconds long.

Questions:

- What do you see happening in the videos?
- What do you think or feel about what you just saw?
- These videos are all real stories. Did the people in the videos give a specific reason about why they started to abuse or misuse prescription drugs?
- Who in these videos seemed most like someone you might know? Do you think prescription drug misuse may be happening in our community?
- The people in these videos were all misusing prescription pills. Do you think their friends or family were aware they were misusing pills? How could their friends or family have supported healthier, safer actions?
- Prescription pain pills (opioids) can be helpful when used as prescribed by a doctor. You often get them for severe pain, after a surgery or even when your wisdom teeth are removed. They come in many forms like Vicodin, Percocet, and Oxycontin. When do you think pain pills are okay and not okay to use?

Not everyone who uses drugs necessarily becomes addicted, sometimes friends see that and think they will be immune to addiction or harm as well. For example:

Scenario A

Steve sees his friend Matt abusing painkillers. Matt's done it on and off for months, but he's not addicted. He just does it at parties. Matt offers some pills to Steve. Steve (because of physiology, temperament, personality, etc.) is much more susceptible to addiction, but doesn't realize it. Steve sees that using pills isn't that big a deal for Matt, so Steve tries. After a few times, Steve ends up addicted.

Scenario B

Chris has been experimenting with opioids for a while. He takes them with friends but he never really gets hooked the way he's always heard about. He feels good while using the drugs, but is able to stop, and has never gone looking for them. He just takes them at parties when his friends offer them. Chris thinks they're no big deal and knows how many he can take without it being a problem. But when Chris is offered some pain pills by a friend, he doesn't realize that they're cut with a high dose of **fantanyl**, and Chris overdoses in spite of taking the same amount of pills he usually takes.