Understanding THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Family and Community Discussion Guide

Understanding the Opioid Epidemic is a one-hour PBS documentary that traces the causes behind the unprecedented growth in the use of prescription opioids and the devastating impact these drugs are having in every part of America. The program captures the story of the opioid crisis through personal stories and interviews with experts. To accompany the television program, a community education and engagement initiative has been developed.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 91 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose. This shocking statistic transcends geographic and socioeconomic borders. The impact on young people, families and communities is devastating. Awareness and education can hopefully begin to slow the epidemic.

“...The rate of death from prescription opiates has been exponentially growing. And that’s only the tip of the iceberg in terms of how many people’s lives are wrecked because of prescription opiates. It’s a huge problem.”

- David Thomas, National Institute on Drug Abuse

“So now we have to start thinking about educating our children better, about educating doctors better, about educating parents better, about educating our public health officials better, about educating our politicians better, all of those people have to come together to really effect a strategy of prevention.”

- Dr. Richard Blondell, National Center for Physician Training in Addiction Medicine

The information and materials provided herein are not intended to be and should not be used for medical diagnosis or treatment. Individuals seeking medical advice or treatment should seek the advice of a physician or other qualified health care provider.
Introduction

Experts believe that the first step to minimizing this epidemic is prevention. Prevention involves awareness and education. Viewing the program can increase understanding and be used as a starting point for deeper discussion. This guide contains ideas to frame a discussion around the television program, Understanding the Opioid Epidemic, and were designed for a range of audiences such as young adults, parents, educators and other community members.

Accompanying lesson plans for middle and high school students can be found on the project website at pbs.org/understandingopioids and on PBS LearningMedia.

Discussion questions and video play a supporting role in understanding the opioid epidemic in our nation. The program may be shown in its entirety or in segments. The goal is to slow this tragic epidemic through awareness and education.

There are many themes featured in Understanding the Opioid Epidemic that can be used to initiate meaningful discussions about this tragic issue.

Some of the themes are:

- The misperception of opioid safety
- Doctors’ over-prescribing of opioid painkillers
- The effects that the opioid epidemic has on individuals, families and whole communities
- The chemical and physical changes that opioids cause to the brain
- The role that pharmaceutical companies, doctors, and misinformation play in this epidemic
- The stigma attached to opioid addiction, treatment, and recovery

“The reason that the United States is in the midst of a severe epidemic of... opioid addiction is because the medical community began to prescribe opioids very aggressively. And as the prescriptions went up, rates of addiction and overdose deaths went up right along with the increase in the prescribing.”

- Dr. Andrew Kolodny, Director, Opioid Policy Research, Brandeis University

Some places that a program screening and discussion can be introduced are at home, in a classroom, as part of a sports team activity, at a parent organization meeting, at a town council meeting, in a health clinic, or workplace. The following are some suggestions for planning a discussion.

Community or Informal Screenings and Discussions

Viewing Understanding the Opioid Epidemic can be a great tool to raise awareness and get people, young and old, to recognize the seriousness of this widespread and misunderstood issue. This can be a valuable opportunity for coaches, parent organizations, or educators, for example. Whatever the setting or audience, choosing any of the following suggestions can lead to an engaging and powerful event.

Understanding the Opioid Epidemic may be shown in its entirety or if time is limited, a selected chapter or two may be screened. Below is the list of chapters with approximate run time.

- Introduction (3 minutes)  
- How Addiction Happens (7:30 minutes)  
- Addiction Affects Everyone (7:15 minutes)
- The Demand for Opioids (15:30 minutes)  
- Dealing with Addiction (15:30 minutes)  
- Where is the Outrage? (6:15 minutes)

Guest speakers or a panel of experts can be very useful for discussions. Some guests to consider are those suffering from addiction, addiction counselors, policy makers, doctors, school district health department representatives, or pharmaceutical representatives.
Before watching *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*, an overview of the opioid epidemic should be given. The program facilitator should research some basic information about opioid prescription painkillers, their history, treatment options, and current impact. Information about the opioid epidemic can be found at the project website at pbs.org/understandingopioids.

After watching *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*, invite your guests to speak about their experiences and allow time for questions and answers from participants. If there are no guest speakers or panel present and the discussion is more informal, just follow up with any of these suggestions.

**General discussion questions:**

1. Are there existing programs in our community to educate doctors about the dangers of overprescribing opioids? If not, what can we do to move towards implementing a program?
2. What are some alternatives to opioid painkiller use? Does our community offer alternate therapies?
3. Does our school district offer education to students about the opioid epidemic and prevention?
4. How can parents be more involved in their children’s personal healthcare? And in their prevention education at school?
5. How can we better support those with the disease of opioid addiction?
6. What can we do as individuals to aid in the prevention of this spreading epidemic? What can we do as a community?
7. How does the misconception that opioid painkillers are okay to take because they are prescribed by doctors affect the decision-making by young adults?
8. What role should parents play in their child’s healthcare?
9. What role can schools play in combatting the opioid epidemic?
10. What are some of the effects that the opioid epidemic has on families? On whole communities?

**Suggested discussion questions specifically for guest speakers:**

1. What factors led the guest to opioid addiction? (for those suffering from addiction)
2. What role did family and/or doctors play in their abuse and addiction? (for those suffering from addiction)
3. What steps do you take in your profession to minimize the opioid epidemic? (for doctors, policy makers, or pharmaceutical representatives)
4. What advice can you give to those suffering from addiction or the general public about opioid addiction? (for addiction counselors)

“Our young people see prescription medications as something safe and effective. A doctor has given it, a pharmacy has filled it, so they feel okay about it.” - Kim Miller, Prestera Center

**Resources for Families**

When it comes to prescription opioid addiction, sometimes the last place to know are parents, relatives and guardians. That is mostly due to the misperception of a doctor-prescribed medication’s safety. Families and loved ones need to move past denial and know what to look for. This guide offers suggestions for families that can also be used as discussion starters. Other resources for families can be found at the project website at pbs.org/understandingopioids.

**Educate yourself**

- Research facts about prescription opioid and heroin addiction
- Be involved in what and how much doctors prescribe your children
- Research all medications prescribed to your children
- Research alternative pain therapies for those that might work for your family
- Be on the lookout for signs and symptoms of misuse or abuse of opioid medications
- Pay attention to changes in friends, declining grades, medications missing
TAKE ACTION

Preventative:  
- Make sure to talk to your child about everything that goes on in their lives
- Have pointed discussions about the opioid epidemic
- Involve yourself in all medical decisions and recommended prescriptions for your child
- Research alternative pain therapies
- Ask your child’s school what prevention education they present on the opioid epidemic
- Be receptive to issues that your child may be dealing with

During treatment and recovery (if necessary):  
- Have discussions about the associated stigma of addiction
- Be supportive to ensure they get the necessary treatment
- Talk to other parents or counselors who have experience dealing with addiction
- Explore all treatment options and alternative pain therapies
- Research treatment facilities that may be appropriate for your child
- Reassure your child that recovery is not easy, relapse is possible, but you will be with them every step of the way

“Every day we battle this, the effects of the drugs. We battle the addictions right here in school. They’re precious kids and they all have special qualities. We need to save their lives, we need to.”

- Shanda Lester, Principal, Oceana Middle School, West Virginia

Resources for Educators

As seen in Understanding the Opioid Epidemic, we know that most students are in some way connected to this tragic situation. Education professionals provide more types of support to their students and families than just academic. We know that basic needs of children are essential for learning. These are some suggestions to provide that extra support in schools:

- Use any appropriate Understanding the Opioid Epidemic resources and lesson plans in your classroom
- Be aware of any home issues involving opioids and offer support to students and families
- Talk to your building and district administrators about using preventive education tools in the classroom
- Bring the opioid epidemic up at school board meetings; ask what support districts are offering
- Share Understanding the Opioid Epidemic resources with parent organizations and district leaders

Classroom curriculum, to be used with the television program Understanding the Opioid Epidemic, has been developed. The lesson plans were created to be used with 7th-8th grade students but include ideas for adapting for use with 9th-12th grade students. Lesson content is based on the documentary as well as important themes such as misperception of opioid safety, community awareness, brain science, stigma, and the struggles associated with treatment and recovery. Lessons are aligned to National Health Education Standards.

The full accompanying lesson plans for middle and high school students can be found on the project website at pbs.org/understandingopioids as well as on PBS LearningMedia.

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