

2.1

AN OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY ABUSED SUBSTANCES

Becoming aware of the increasing problem of substance use disorder in greater Minnesota, and the drugs that are involved, can equip community members to be a part of the solution.

AN OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY ABUSED SUBSTANCES

In this lesson you will:

- Gain awareness of the prevalence of substance abuse disorders
- Identify the substances that are commonly used at this time and their characteristics

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The issue of substance abuse is becoming an ever-increasing problem in the state of Minnesota. In 2021, there were 100,286 overdose deaths reported to the Minnesota Department of Health - a 22% increase from the 2020 total. This equates to, on average, more than three people dying every day from an overdose of any drug type. Significantly, for the first time since 2014, there was a larger percentage increase in overdose deaths in greater Minnesota than the seven county metropolitan area. The metro area only experienced a 20% increase while greater MN had a 23% increase from the previous year. Nationwide, the statistics on opioid use show that every five minutes somebody will pass away from an opioid-related drug overdose.

In the greater Minnesota area, people are not commonly seen using drugs on the street or sidewalk or overdosing in the alleys. It does happen, but it is not common. In contrast, open-market drug use and sales are happening in St. Paul or Minneapolis. You will see people openly buying and selling drugs, overdosing on the street, and obviously struggling with substance use disorder and serious mental health challenges. Many community members in the Cities carry Narcan (Naloxone), a life saving medicine that can reverse an opioid overdose. If you can recognize the signs and symptoms of an overdose, and you have Narcan ready, you can potentially save a life. There are coalitions in the Cities delivering life-saving opioid-overdose

reverse medications right to people's doors so community members are ready to help people on their streets.

Narcan is not distributed as widely in rural areas because community members are not seeing the problem. Drug use is confined to certain houses or select neighborhoods and tends to happen at night. People involved with drug use in the Lakes area are getting rides rather than walking. All of the drugs that are widely used elsewhere - opioids including heroin and fentanyl, alcohol, cocaine or crack, methamphetamines, inhalants, and marijuana - are all in use in the Lakes area.

Opioids, Heroin and Fentanyl (Depressants)

Opioids are a class of drugs that includes the illegal drug heroin as well as power pain relievers available by prescription, such as oxycodone (Oxycontin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), codeine, morphine, fentanyl, methadone, and many others. The synthetic opioid fentanyl is one hundred times more potent than morphine and fifty times more potent than heroin. There is currently an opioid epidemic throughout the U.S. A lack of compassion in the media or the community deters many opioid addicts from seeking help. They will lose their families, their jobs, their homes and their health, but they will still continue to use. This demonstrates the two criteria for addiction that are taught in Alcoholics

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES: AN OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY ABUSED SUBSTANCES

Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous: the user experiences obsession and compulsion over the chosen substance. This is the result of changes in the brain from drug or alcohol abuse. The reward system in the brain has been hijacked, and, regardless of the consequences, the person will continue to use. It's considered a mental health disorder because of the insane loop that people get stuck on . . . using - getting drugs - using - finding ways to get more drugs.



Opioids, heroin and fentanyl are a quick way to fall into that loop. They are extremely addictive substances. Rather than addiction happening over time, a one-time use can hijack the brain. A lack of coping skills for the pain of life puts an individual at risk for these drugs. Using them becomes an easy button for erasing the pain of our worries and troubles. Users will describe it as “falling in love” or being wrapped up in a warm blanket or a warm embrace; like the best hug they’ve ever had. As they continue to seek out that feeling to avoid the pains of life or mental health symptoms, their tolerance builds. They have to use more and more to experience the pleasure they’re chasing. Many people are letting it take them all the way to their grave.

Physical warning signs that indicate a person is under the influence of opioids, heroin or fentanyl are:

- Constricted/unusually small “pin-point” pupils. Law enforcement officers will do a quick once-over with their flashlights when they come up to a car window or meet somebody on the street in order to check for pupil constriction.
- Drowsiness, slurred speech and slow cognitive responses. People can seem really tired, and require a long time to respond to a simple question like, “How are you today?”

Nodding off is actually an early warning sign of an overdose that requires keeping a close watch on the person. Don’t let them nod off and fall asleep in a corner; keep checking on them. Engage them; let them know you’re concerned about them. Make sure their respirations stay normal and they continue to respond to questions. If you are helping individuals struggling with addiction to one of these substances, always have Narcan within a few steps.

Withdrawal symptoms include insomnia, restlessness, severe take-you-to-your-knees kind of abdominal cramping, vomiting and diarrhea (including loss of bowel control), watery eyes and large pupils, runny nose, sweating (hot and cold), muscle and bone pain, and uncontrollable leg movements. Medication-assisted treatments (MAT) are now available using medications like methadone or suboxone to reduce opioid cravings and withdrawal symptoms. These treatments have empowered people to choose recovery giving them

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES: AN OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY ABUSED SUBSTANCES

confidence they can make it through the withdrawal period.

Alcohol (depressant)

Alcohol is a commonly used and commonly approved substance. It's socially acceptable and legal as long as the person drinking is making good choices. In reality, our body responds to alcohol as it does to a poison no matter to what degree we are using it. Alcohol wreaks havoc on our bodies, including our brain, and it impairs our ability to make good choices. In the most severe cases, alcoholism results in brain damage. There are three facilities in this state that are solely dedicated to housing and treating people with chronic alcoholism. The residents are fed three meals a day, and allowed to continue to drink because they are people with wet brain. This syndrome is a permanent form of brain damage that results from long term alcoholism and can't be treated once it has progressed past a certain point.

Alcohol is one of very few substances where the withdrawal alone - the absence of that substance in your system - can kill you. Medical treatment is essential for withdrawal. Although there is not a detox center in the Lakes Area, there are multiple detox facilities around the state including Duluth, St. Cloud, and the Twin Cities. Withdrawal may cause delirium tremens, or DT's as they are commonly known. Symptoms of DT's include tremors especially in the hands, confusion, agitation with aggressive behavior, psychosis (hallucinations or paranoia), heavy sweating, seizures,

elevated body temperature, headaches, nausea and vomiting, and a fast heart rate.

Cocaine and Crack (Stimulant)

Crack is still very much a problem in rural Minnesota as well as the Twin Cities. It is a more potent version of cocaine made by dissolving cocaine into a mixture of water and ammonia or baking soda, then boiling it into a solid substance form. It can look like little white rocks. Many people will smoke it; it can also be injected with needles intravenously. It has a stronger effect than cocaine and causes a quicker high but the effects fade more rapidly. A crack user will exhibit a lot of agitation and a compulsion to immediately get more of the drug once the high has worn off. Their brain has been hijacked and you will see them doing crazy things to be able to get back to the drug - putting their desire for crack before food, water and other basic needs.

Cocaine is frequently used at bars. It's a party drug; anytime you see people partying in large groups it's safe to assume there are probably cocaine users there.

Physical warning signs that a person is under the influence of cocaine include:

- Fast movements
- Talking rapidly
- Quick change of mood - happy and talkative to immediately angry
- Paranoia - avoiding direct eye contact
- Tics - sudden, brief, and repetitive body movements

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES: AN OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY ABUSED SUBSTANCES

- Runny nose or nosebleeds
- Decreased appetite
- Dilated pupils - the color of the iris may not be visible, or the pupil remains dilated even in bright light. Causes a hypersensitivity to light.
- Hypersensitivity to touch - always ask before using physical touch especially if the person may have a substance use disorder

Methamphetamine (Stimulant)

Meth is fairly common in the Lakes area. Law enforcement has been working hard to eliminate not only the use of this drug but also its production because of the risks associated with it. Meth is most commonly smoked. If you are with persons who are smoking meth, your body can interact with the drug even if you are not consuming it yourself. Methamphetamine smoke, like other kinds of smoke, is able to bind to certain parts of the body and cling to them which can result in eventual health problems. Individuals are at risk for developing methamphetamine-related effects and complications if they are with people who smoke while others are around them. Children who have been in an atmosphere with meth smoke or production have been found to have highly elevated levels of meth in their system. The substance gets into the air and is also absorbed by things like rugs and furniture. The presence of meth chemicals is detectable for years in homes or buildings where meth was once used or manufactured. Exposure to those lingering substances can have health effects of their own.

The stimulant effect of methamphetamine lasts much longer than crack or cocaine. A person using cocaine might feel the heightened effects for a couple of hours but a person using meth can be elevated for many hours. Depending on the potency of the meth, the high may last 5-6 hours or as much as 8-10 hours. The composition of meth today makes it much worse than what was available in the early 2000's. Today's version is more potent and has more toxic byproducts. People will use more frequently and stay awake for multiple days. Their brain is hijacked and consumed with using, and finding ways to get money to use. They are not thinking about the consequences to themselves or others as a result of their use.

Physical warning signs of use:

- A burning plastic smell
- Dilated pupils
- Extreme weight loss
- Severe dental problems
- Open sores or scabs and scars on the skin (known as meth mites) - caused by the meth chemical being detoxed through the skin causing skin irritation. To someone under the influence, this can feel like bugs crawling on them. A shower that causes sweating will promote the detox and the removal of the toxins from the skin
- Psychotic episodes - up to 40% of individuals who are chronic meth users will experience a disconnect from reality causing delusions and paranoia

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES: AN OVERVIEW OF COMMONLY ABUSED SUBSTANCES

Note: In the case of psychosis, people who are trained to keep the meth user safe and get them the help needed as well as ensuring the safety of the people around them should be contacted. The mobile crisis outreach team or law enforcement officers are the best options in the Lakes Area.

Inhalants

People have been using inhalants for decades - solvents, aerosol cans, industrial glues, and gases. Anything that is pressurized has the capability of giving you a really quick high from “huffing.” They are the substance of choice for younger people or individuals who don’t have access to other drugs. Inhalants are a quick and easy buy at nearly any store, and do not require an ID. Because the effects don’t last long, people will inhale over and over and over again in a short period of time. This causes a reduction in their ability to feel pain, and can reduce oxygen to the brain causing the person to pass out. If injury occurs when they pass out, they will oftentimes not remember what happened to them before regaining consciousness.



Physical warning signs of use:

- Sores around the mouth or the nose (chemical burns)
- Slurred speech.
- Paint stains on the clothes or body (especially the face)
- Chemical odor - detoxing effect of the body
- Nausea and loss of appetite

Inhalant chemicals are very damaging to the body. They get into the bloodstream and impact the density of the bones, the health of internal organs, and can cause permanent brain damage in a short amount of time.

Nutrition

Malnutrition is common to all substance use disorders because of the obsession and compulsion that result from changes in the brain caused by the drug. The user is not thinking about eating or staying hydrated; their mind is consumed with a desire for the drug or alcohol. Money is usually spent on drugs rather than food. A decrease in appetite may also contribute to irregular eating and poor nutrition, and the substances themselves can prevent gut absorption of nutrients. A gray skin tone and skin sores are visible indications of nutrient deficiencies.

During recovery, a balanced nutritious diet that improves mood and health can help prevent the chances of relapse. Regular meals are important. The chronic use of substances can cause a person to forget what it is like to be hungry, and, instead, think hunger is a drug craving. They should be

DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think there is a worst drug?
2. Are prescription drugs safer than illegal drugs such as cocaine?
3. Share with each other your personal definition of addiction.
4. People may say they have an addiction to shopping or to a certain food they really like. Is that person truly addicted? How can you tell? Is there any way to be able to tell for sure that a person has a genuine addiction as opposed to a lack of self-discipline? Is there a difference?
5. As a society, what is the best way to deal with someone addicted to illegal substances? E.g. jail, residential treatment, etc.
Discuss who should pay for the treatment and what should be done if the person doesn't have enough money to assist with the fees.
6. Spend time brainstorming ways to help prevent substance use disorders.

PRACTICE, ROLE PLAY, OR MORE TO CONSIDER

1. Drugs and alcohol affect a person's judgment, thoughts, feelings, and more. Such changes can lead people to make decisions that they would not make while using drugs or alcohol. With this in mind, Ryan Dowd (2) offers a mental trick to help you avoid judging a person who is struggling with addiction: imagine them as two people; separate your feelings for the person from your feelings about their addiction. Your job is to love the person and help him or her to get rid of the addiction that has taken over.

E.g. Rachel and Rachel's addiction . . . Rachel is a wonderful person who was always drawing and creating as a child and dreamed of becoming an artist. But Rachel's addiction has taken over her life and crushed all her aspirations. Rachel was close to her parents and was once in love with a man. Now Rachel's addiction doesn't care about anyone else. Rachel is a generous person. Rachel's addiction is a liar and a thief. Rachel is made in the image of God. Rachel's addiction is a demon that has taken over her body for its own purposes.

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