



DrugFree@WorkPlace

Brain Injury Epidemic in America

There is a very deadly opioid epidemic in America, but there is an even more serious brain injury epidemic that impacts more people and ruins thousands of lives annually.

According to the CDC, synthetic opioids (like fentanyl) are the primary driver of overdose deaths in the United States. Approximately 100,000 Americans lose their lives to fentanyl overdoses every year.

Fentanyl acts on the central nervous system—medically, it's used to relieve severe pain—but street versions of the drug are unpredictable and can be contaminated with toxic chemical compounds, which means overdoses are common. But while a lot of attention is paid to overdose *deaths*, few people are aware of the brain injuries that occur in individuals who survive those overdoses.

Hypoxic Brain Damage

Research conducted by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention in Atlanta, has shown that there are about 15 non-fatal drug overdoses for every one that kills a drug user. And every non-lethal overdose can inflict brain damage on the victim.

Fentanyl, and other synthetic opioids target the part of the brain that controls breathing, and an overdose can suppress breathing to the point that brain cells are starved of oxygen. Because of this lack of oxygen to the brain, overdose victims begin to suffer brain damage within minutes. This is known as hypoxic brain damage.

As the number of drug overdoses in the U.S. continues to rise, doctors are struggling to cope with the increasing number of patients facing irreversible brain damage and other long-term health issues.

A Vicious Cycle

Overdose survivors often suffer from hypoxic brain injuries that create problems with attention, memory, motor coordination, emotional regulation, decision-making, and problem-solving. This results in a worsening of stress levels, mental health conditions, and addiction problems which produces a vicious cycle that is extremely difficult to break out of.

Drug users who have survived an overdose and suffer from hypoxic brain injury also no longer seem to have an appropriate sense of right and wrong, or of time and place (they can be seen openly injecting drugs in public places and even in front of children).

Hypoxic brain injury also makes it difficult for a person to live independently. Victims often need supportive housing and long-term care. Unfortunately, there are very few programs available that offer the support and assistance that drug users with acquired brain injuries need. Even free 12-step programs rarely work, because the brain injury makes information processing and memory functions difficult. In the same way, methadone programs don't work because they require participants to return to a clinic every day for increasing doses, and the brain injury makes following through almost impossible.

The only glimmer of hope for those with overdose-induced brain injuries is that while some parts of the brain will never fully recover, the human brain is capable of a lot of compensation, and it may be possible to retrain the brain and recover at least some of the cognitive functions that have been lost.

Recommended Actions

While there are no easy solutions to the brain injury epidemic, the following recommendations could help to reduce the negative impact.

Prevention: Overdose prevention and education initiatives must target individuals living with brain injury, caregivers, and providers. State behavioral health and brain injury programs should collaborate to ensure that efforts for prevention target this population. Federal prevention resources/tools should highlight the importance of this issue and recommend strategies for states.

Substance Use Disorders (SUD) Treatment: Services designed to address SUD must be accessible to individuals with brain injury. Providers should routinely screen for a history of brain injury among consumers served and ensure treatment services are accessible for individuals with cognitive, behavioral, and physical disabilities resulting from a brain injury.

Brain Injury Services Programs: Individuals who have sustained a brain injury resulting from an overdose require specialized services. State programs need to develop capacity and expertise to support a growing number of individuals living with an acquired brain injury from overdose. Understanding best practices in SUD screening, recovery, and treatment are critical.



Tell us about your experience!

Scan the QR code with your phone camera to share your thoughts, suggestions, and experiences about our newsletters. Your feedback helps us improve. We appreciate you for being part of our journey!

