

Each of us have a mental picture of what substance abuse and addiction look like. Some will think back to those “Faces of Meth” public service campaigns showing the regression of the unfortunate addict whose photographs move from someone who looks like your neighbor to a gaunt and unkept soul with sunken eyes and bad teeth. Others might bring to mind a stereotypical “stoner” character from movies or television. Few people think of their son or daughter, niece or nephew, good friend, or co-worker. The tragic reality is that substance abuse can and does afflict people who don’t fit our mental picture.

Opioids encompass a broad range of drugs and their addictive properties are responsible for ensnaring millions of people in their cycle of harm and abuse. Codeine, morphine, and hydrocodone are a few opioids that commonly appear in prescription medications. Fentanyl, carfentanyl, and heroin are common street drugs in the opioid family. The abuse of these substances has soared in MN and throughout the country. The path to opioid abuse can be deceptive, with many people beginning their journey into addiction through pills. Pills are familiar to us as we commonly buy them alongside our groceries and get them from doctors working to improve our health. Their familiarity disguises the power of these substances to addict or the danger of the unknown composition of pills made in clandestine facilities.

According to statistics from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), 343 Minnesotans died from opioid overdoses in 2018. In 2020, that number almost doubled to 678 deaths. Statistics from MDH show a similar spike in nonfatal overdose cases, with victims between the ages of 15 and 34 making up the majority of those treated. Addiction finds these victims through many routes. Left over prescription pills stolen from a medicine cabinet or sold by their owner, pills pressed in laboratories outside the US or in clandestine operations inside the US, or heroin in its many forms all reach their tentacles into every corner of society and take hold of their victims.

Numbers can give us one perspective of a problem. However, numbers alone fail to capture the whole story. When you wish to learn about a journey, it is best to listen to someone who has already traveled the path. For those whose lives have not already been touched by opioid addiction, I’d ask you spend a few moments on YouTube. Searching “MN opioid addiction story” there provides pages and pages of results. These videos of individuals and families telling their stories of opioid addiction, recovery, and sometime loss is powerful and heart-wrenching. Their stories provide context to the personal tragedy and struggles of those caught in opioid addiction.

All of us can play a part in stemming the tide of opioid abuse. Securing and disposing of excess prescription medication is an easy step. Medication drop boxes are available at the Benton County Sheriff’s Office, Sauk Rapids Police Department, Rice Police Department, and many other locations. Prescription and over-the-counter medications are accepted free of charge and no questions asked. Being alert for danger signs in the people you know is key to preventing the next tragedy. Opioid addiction can be difficult to detect, however there are some things to watch for. Unexplained changes in mood or behavior is a concern that could have many causes, one of which might be related to opioid abuse. Changes in sleeping patterns or episodes of extreme anxiety could indicate a problem with opioid use. Using opioid medications in ways contrary to instructions is a clear sign of trouble. The instructions on opioid medications are very important and deviating from the doctor’s instructions is a very serious matter. Taking opioid medications “just in case” they are needed is a concerning behavior. Seeking opioid medications from multiple doctors, other people, or non-pharmacy sources indicates a problem.

Any suspicions of opioid abuse should be explored promptly. There is help available for those who are struggling with opioid addiction. Professional help is the best solution for those caught in this trap. Opioids have claimed the lives of too many of our families, friends, and neighbors. Taking action to help someone struggling with addiction can be uncomfortable and scary. These feelings are momentary and will pass. What won't pass is the loss felt by families whose loved ones are claimed by opioid addiction. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.