5 Steps to Solving the Opioid Crisis

By paying attention and anticipating pain (tension, need for energy, and so on), people come to “health consciousness” and are less likely to abuse prescription drugs.

I teach a course on primary prevention of prescription drug (Rx) misuse for adults. Following one class, a woman told me, “I wouldn’t even have been able to come to work today without taking my Xanax. Now I realize I needed the reminder about alternatives, exercise, talking to a counselor. I am going to get help.”

She appeared grateful, as though coming out of a fog, and her story validated my belief: We are facing an unprecedented need to reduce Rx demand in order to educate adults about prevention. While drug prevention is taught throughout primary education, the adult and aging brain needs reminders. We also need to be more...
curious about the motives behind potential Rx use and to be more alert to triggers that can lead to misuse.

Public health solutions now myopically focus on crisis intervention. For example, last year, the National Institutes of Health announced its strategy for the opioid crisis: develop a better pain pill, one not as addictive as opioids. A noble pursuit, but perhaps it’s time to rediscover our original desire and even fascination with these drugs. It’s called pharmophilia, and it links the ancient search for an “immortal elixir,” or fountain of youth, through the heyday of snake-oil sales folk, to the promise of a pill that takes away pain, makes you feel great, and isn’t addictive. Modern medicine and pharmaceuticals save lives. But let’s reassess them.

In particular, consider U.S. statistics regarding the opioid epidemic, related deaths, and increases in suicide and alcohol disorder. Drug overdose is now the leading cause of death for people under 50. In February 2018, the annual Gallup Well-Being Index showed the largest year-over-year decline in well-being since the index was started in 2008. Meanwhile, a record 21 states saw a reduction in well-being in 2017, with pain and depression as key factors. Although such statistics typically don’t lead to action until people are personally affected, pretty much everyone is now affected:

You struggle with Rx use—for pain, anxiety, stress, sleep, attention, or performance.

You know a family member, friend, or coworker who struggles.

You are stressed because your aging parent is taking too many drugs.

You’re concerned about Rx use by your child for ADHD or anxiety.

You’re an employer battling Rx use in your workforce. Two recent examples: A workforce manager cannot fill jobs “because applicants can’t pass the [opioid] drug test”; and a CEO terminated a key supervisor for borrowing Rx drugs from employees.

THE 5-STEP SOLUTION
How health-conscious are you? When you think of health-conscious people, who comes to mind? These questions suggest a common belief that health consciousness (HC) is a trait or enduring characteristic that some people have and some don’t. Our research suggests that HC is actually a process that anyone can tap into. Basically, HC is the process of paying attention to what we ingest; getting exercise and rest; and using our body and mind together for a health-enhancing purpose. Our 5-step exercise is designed to help you understand HC in yourself. Harnessing HC may prevent your own pharmophilia!

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Do a quick assessment of your current HC quotient. While your HC quotient may wax and wane throughout the day, just reviewing the six statements in Step 1 can act like a sparkplug to beginning the HC process.

Consider your triggers (situations, stimuli, or personal behaviors) that might put you at risk for Rx misuse. The chart shows four types of triggers, each type corresponding to a particular drug class.

How can you stay alert, given these triggers? Keep in mind that pain, anxiety, or energy needs occur across all dimensions of wellness: physical, emotional, social, and spiritual.

Explore alternatives and find the healthy alternative that is right for you or others you are concerned about.

Ask yourself: What is the most responsible thing to do? This 5-step process is designed to prevent problems, rather than solve or treat them. Carl Jung is often quoted as saying, “There is no coming to consciousness without pain.” We invite you to consider the proactive twist on Jung: Stay alert, anticipate pain or tension, recognize your need for energy, use alternatives, and you will propel yourself into health consciousness.

—JOEL BENNETT

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[TRIGGERS]</th>
<th>EXAMPLES OF RELATED DRUGS</th>
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<tr>
<td>You have a problem relaxing or are hyperactive or too jittery.</td>
<td>Sedatives—barbiturates (&quot;sleeping pills&quot;)</td>
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<td>You need energy or more focus, or you are over-concerned about weight loss.</td>
<td>Stimulants—amphetamine (Adderall)</td>
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<tr>
<td>You feel anxious, tense, or easily overwhelmed.</td>
<td>Tranquilizers—benzodiazepines (Xanax)</td>
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<tr>
<td>You have pain or anticipate pain.</td>
<td>Opioids—hydrocodone (Vicodin)</td>
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STEP 3. STAYING ALERT OR VIGILANT
In which dimension of wellness is the trigger most likely to occur? Physical, relationships, spiritual, emotional, workplace, financial?

For example, physical pain triggers are more likely with an upcoming dentist visit, surgery, injury, or cold weather. Need for energy may be more likely at work. Anxiety may occur in anticipation of social interaction or performance. A need to relax and unwind may occur after a long day of vigorous activity.

STEP 4. SELECT A HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE
For every one of the triggers, there are alternatives to Rx drugs, often based on evidence (and often described in issues of Spirituality & Health and online at spiritualityhealth.com). Consider essential oils; herbal teas; massage; mind-body practices like tai chi, yoga, qigong; or mindfulness. For pain, a variety of approaches are available, ranging from acupuncture and physical therapy to hydrotherapy and microstimulation.

STEP 5. BE RESPONSIBLE
Rx drugs, per se, are neither good nor bad. Health consciousness means being both awake and responsible. If you are using Rx drugs, only use them as prescribed, dispose of them properly, and do not share them with others. If your job requires you to report Rx drug use, do so. Most important of all, check in with yourself. Do this 5-step exercise whenever presented with the opportunity to misuse Rx drugs.