

Let's talk about...

# Prescription Drug Addiction

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

**PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE CAN AFFECT PEOPLE OF ALL DIFFERENT AGES AND WALKS OF LIFE. DEPENDENCE ON PRESCRIPTION DRUGS OFTEN STARTS OUT INNOCENTLY ENOUGH... A PATIENT CONTINUES TO TAKE PILLS NEEDED TO RELIEVE PAIN AFTER AN ACCIDENT. AFTER A PERIOD OF TIME, THE USER BELIEVES HE OR SHE CAN NO LONGER FUNCTION WITHOUT THEM. SOME FAMOUS PEOPLE WHO HAVE ADMITTED TO HAVING OVERCOME PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE INCLUDE: GEORGE MICHAEL, RUSH LIMBAUGH, ELIZABETH TAYLOR, JUDY GARLAND, CARRIE FISHER, AND MATTHEW PERRY**

It is estimated that more than one million Canadians are addicted to the prescription medications that were meant to heal them. The problem is so widespread, some addictions specialists say five times as many Canadians are addicted to medications than are hooked on heroin or cocaine. The most commonly abused drugs are benzodiazepines, such as Xanax or Valium used to treat anxiety, and opiate painkillers, such as Oxycontin.

The greatest danger with prescription drugs occurs when they are used in combination, particularly with alcohol. The combined effects of alcohol and another drug can be far greater than the effect of either one taken alone. Because alcohol is a depressant, adding it to another drug with depressant effects (i.e. sleeping pills, tranquilizers, prescription painkillers) can depress all central nervous functions causing severe impairment, respiratory failure, and death.

The most commonly abused prescription drugs are as addictive as some street drugs and therefore just as difficult to stop taking. Quitting can be both difficult and dangerous. Often, the body must be detoxified as the central nervous system is weaned from the drug. It is also important that someone not stop taking a prescribed drug without first speaking to their doctor.

Prescription drug addiction is often recognizable by behaviours such as:

- A preoccupation with dosing schedules/amounts.
- A tendency to embellish details of their condition or claim it is worsening.
- Seeing several doctors, or 'doctor shopping' to get additional medication.
- Severe mood changes, panic attacks

- Changes of appetite, sleep problems
- Complaints of anxiety, depression, disorientation
- Lack of concern over major events or situations
- Loss of interest in certain areas of life.
- Withdrawal symptoms occurring when the drug is stopped, even temporarily.

## PRESCRIPTION DRUGS AND SENIORS

Some seniors inadvertently end up abusing prescription medications because of incorrectly following instructions, mixing medications, forgetting to take medicines, and a reluctance to ask for assistance. Although this kind of abuse is common, it is frequently misdiagnosed by physicians and goes unnoticed by family members.

Doctors often prescribe a class of drugs known as benzodiazepines after a traumatic event, such as the loss of a spouse. These drugs work by slowing brain activity. The drugs can help older people sleep or feel calmer, even during a difficult period. In many cases, people feel much better and so they take more than prescribed, then ask the doctor to refill their prescription. Before long they may have a serious dependency.

If you are looking out for an elderly loved one:

- Remind them to always avoid alcohol when taking painkillers or sedatives.
- If they are taking several different medications, suggest they look into having them blister-packed.
- Encourage them to bring all their medications to their doctor when they go for their yearly checkups, so the physician has a record of exactly what they're taking.
- Check in with them regularly about their medication use – prescription and over-the-counter – so you know what they are taking and why. Be sure they understand label warnings and the dangers of drug interaction.
- Encourage them to throw out outdated prescription and over-the-counter medications.

## GETTING HELP

If you are concerned that you might be addicted to prescription drugs, talk with your doctor right away.

If you suspect someone you care about is abusing prescription drugs, it may be up to you to confront him or her about the problem. To learn how you can help, contact your EFAP or a local drug and alcohol agency.

**Recommended Reading:** *Addiction by Prescription: One Woman's Triumph and Fight for Change*, Joan E. Gadsby, Key Porter Books



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