

CLOSE-UP: Medications

By Laura D'Angelo

Crushed Dreams

Doctors use drugs to heal, but in the wrong hands, drugs can wreck lives.

While 17-year-old Ryan Curry slept, visions of OxyContin danced in his head. Ryan was thrilled to see Oxy pills scattered under the bed, until unbearable cravings jarred him awake. Now, he could see that there were no pills. Drenched in cold sweat, Ryan's body convulsed and he began a frantic search for more OxyContin.

Ryan never thought he'd become addicted to OxyContin, a powerful drug that's prescribed for people with severe pain. Like most prescription medications, when OxyContin is used for the medical reasons prescribed and taken in the dosage and form prescribed, it can ease suffering for millions of Americans. When abused, prescription drugs can push people over the edge into addiction, injury, or even death.



Free from Painkillers

"Medications can be dangerous. Prescription drugs need to be taken by people who are under medical supervision," says Jerry Frankenheim, Ph.D., a pharmacologist at the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). "Drugs that are abused can change the way your brain functions for a very long time."

OxyContin, whose active ingredient is oxycodone hydrochloride, was hailed as revolutionary in 1996 when it appeared on the market. Like some other painkillers, oxycodone is an opioid. It works as heroin does, quieting pain messages by slowing the central nervous system. OxyContin is unique in that each pill releases medication over a 12-hour period. When crushed and snorted, however, the drug acts differently. Then, a day's worth of painkiller hits the user's brain at once, upsetting the normal flow of brain chemicals.

Ryan, who lives in Newport, Maine, had smoked marijuana for four years before experimenting with prescription drugs. "Pot didn't have the same kick that it used to," he says. "I was bored, looking for a thrill, and trying to be cool."

Ryan quickly got hooked on oxycodone. "I felt so euphoric—like I could be happy sitting in a trashcan in the dark somewhere," Ryan says. He turned his girlfriend on and together they joined the small number of teens who abuse OxyContin. According to NIDA, 4 percent of high school seniors reported using OxyContin in 2002, along with 3 percent of 10th-graders and 1.3 percent of 8th-graders.

Ryan quit college to work for an electrician to earn cash to buy pills. He began to use more and more OxyContin. "When I had pills, I'd feel like a king," he says. Ryan was building a physical tolerance for the drug and needed more to avoid going through withdrawal. "I'd wake up and snort 30 or 40 milligrams of Oxy—not to get high, but to feel normal, not sick." Over the next two years, Ryan went from that first 20-milligram rush to a 240-milligram-a-day habit.

Opioids that are abused can take over the emotional center of the brain called the limbic system. Craving for the drug replaces other cravings for pleasures like food, friends, and achievement. "The drug becomes the most important thing in people's lives," Frankenheim says.

Ryan's mom had pleaded with him to get help, but Ryan denied he was doing drugs. Finally, Ryan hit bottom when his girlfriend left him. He let his mom take him to a drug treatment center.

Ryan has finally kicked his addiction to OxyContin. He has been drug-free for six months. As treatment, he attends weekly counseling sessions, where he deals with intense feelings that were turned off by Oxy. "Drugs short-circuit the brain," Frankenheim explains. "When a person comes off the drug and the brain starts coming back to normal, it can feel like a rebirth."

True, says Ryan, who sometimes feels like a beginner in his own life. "I cry at movies I've seen before. Yesterday, I put a grape in my mouth and spit it out because it tasted more bitter than I remembered."

"I feel sad that I lost those years of my life and would give anything to get them back," Ryan says. "But now I have a life other than drugs. I'm taking college classes. I have clean friends and support.... I actually feel.... That's a big change."

Illustrations: Stephen Kroninger

From Scholastic and the Scientists of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services