

CHASING THE DRAGON



THE LIFE OF AN OPIATE ADDICT



DISCUSSION GUIDE



Dear Educator,

On behalf of our two agencies, we would like to thank you for incorporating *Chasing the Dragon: The Life of an Opiate Addict* into your school's curriculum. The opioid and prescription drug abuse epidemic that is sweeping the country is a problem unlike anything we have seen before. We created this documentary to help students develop a greater understanding of this crisis to create a deeper appreciation about the dangers of opioid addiction. Our goal is to reach youth before an addiction can set in.

We have worked with educators to create a study guide to supplement the documentary. We believe the enclosed guide will help stimulate thoughtful and honest dialogue about this epidemic. Through these conversations, we hope to prevent additional students from becoming victims.

We thank you for your help in spreading this message to students, parents, and fellow educators about this horrible epidemic. If, as you begin to implement this documentary into your classrooms, you find that you need additional resources on this topic, or if you would like experts from our respective agencies to speak in your schools, please contact your local FBI or DEA field office. We stand ready to help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James B. Comey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James B. Comey
FBI Director

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chuck Rosenberg". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chuck Rosenberg
Acting DEA Administrator

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES:

This documentary gives a face to the lurking evil of opiate addiction that statistics measure to be at epidemic levels. Federal, state, and local law enforcement officers are asking educational institutions across the country to inform teenagers of the hazards of drug abuse and expose the truth about the opiate epidemic.

The purpose of this film and follow-up activities is to raise awareness of drug abuse and the profound downward spiral that can be caused by opiate addiction. The film content has been provided by actual people who abused opiates or whose children abused opiates. They selflessly shared their unfiltered, impassioned, unscripted, and painful accounts to try to stop other people from taking drugs and destroying lives.

The objectives of the discussion guide are to have students process and interact with the content covered in the film and then answer questions to demonstrate their understanding of the material. Some of the questions ask for direct recall of information while others require students to synthesize content and respond. An affective objective—or one that is influenced by emotions—is to have students reflect on how their own lives and lives of family members could be ruined if they or their friends were addicted to opiates. Discussion facilitators should ask students to share their personal feelings, thoughts, and concerns. A final objective is to get students to be proactive in the fight against drug abuse. A set of culminating activities asks students to integrate ideas by designing diagrams, writing proposals, using social media, creating art projects, and planning initiatives.

Students are not watching this film, answering questions, and completing projects to pass a test; they are doing this to save lives—maybe even their own.

The film includes strong language, intense content, and graphic images. An example of an opt-out form and parental waiver can be downloaded at www.fbi.gov/ChasingTheDragon for schools to send home with students should administrators choose to do so.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS:

Banging – slang for a procedure involving the injection of a solution containing heroin or prescription opioids directly into the bloodstream.

Chasing the Dragon – expression given to the pursuit of the original or ultimate but unattainable high, which can lead to a dangerous spiral of legal and health consequences.

Dope – slang for heroin.

Heroin – an opioid drug that is synthesized from morphine, a naturally occurring substance extracted from the seedpod of the Asian opium poppy plant.¹

Opiates/Opioids – drugs (such as heroin) derived from compounds found in the opium poppy plant, or synthetic drugs (such as prescription painkillers) that contain substances that mimic these compounds. These terms are often used interchangeably.

Oxycodone – a semi-synthetic narcotic analgesic that is a popular drug of abuse. It is synthesized from thebaine, a constituent of the poppy plant.²

Tolerance – a state in which a person no longer responds to a drug and a higher dose is required to achieve the same effect.³

Withdrawal – the wide range of symptoms that occur after stopping or dramatically reducing opiate drugs after heavy and prolonged use. Symptoms include but are not limited to agitation, anxiety, sweating, body aches, abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.⁴

1 "Heroin," *National Institute on Drug Abuse*, last modified March 2015, <http://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/heroin>.

2 *Drugs of Abuse, 2015 Edition* (Drug Enforcement Administration, 2015), 43, accessed January 19, 2016, http://www.dea.gov/pr/multimedia-library/publications/drug_of_abuse.pdf.

3 "The Neurobiology of Drug Addiction," *National Institute on Drug Abuse*, last modified January 2007, <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/teaching-packets/neurobiology-drug-addiction/section-iii-action-heroin-morphine/6-definition-tolerance>.

4 "Opiate withdrawal," *MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine*, last modified April 5, 2013, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000949.htm>.

CENTRAL THEMES:

The film organizes the interviewees' testimony along a series of central themes showing how people become addicted to opiates and the severe consequences of addiction. Students should identify these themes, listed below, during class discussion of content covered in the film.

Everyone is at risk of opiate addiction—it does not discriminate. The opiate epidemic has spread rapidly due to a false perception that only certain demographics are at risk. Persons of all life circumstances become victims each day. High school students are no exception.

Opiate addiction can occur quickly, and, in most cases, individuals first become addicted by abusing pain pills. Prescription drugs are very accessible and can rapidly lead to addiction if abused.

A life-consuming routine that revolves around seeking opiates emerges once a person becomes addicted. It is this routine that is best described by the expression “chasing the dragon.”

Increasing tolerance to opiates can often lead to a more costly and dangerous addiction in terms of quantity, substance type, and method of abuse. It is this dynamic of opiate addiction that can cause individuals to take greater and greater risks as they pursue the unattainable experience of the first high.

Legal consequences often result from the lengths users will go to support their opiate habit. The grip of addiction can lead an ordinarily law-abiding person to cross legal boundaries he/she would normally have respected—many opiate-addicted individuals turn to theft, fraud, and prostitution to obtain drugs. The public harm associated with opiate abuse has many forms, affecting more than just the addicted persons themselves.

Health consequences from opiate abuse are prevalent and severe. Bloodborne pathogens, infections, permanent injury due to overdoses, and other health issues make opiate addiction extremely dangerous.

Withdrawal from opiates is often extremely difficult and represents a significant challenge to breaking the cycle of abuse. Addicted persons often find their pursuit of opiates is no longer for the purpose of getting high but to avoid experiencing the symptoms of withdrawal.

Overdoses are common. Misconceptions exist that overdoses are only associated with abuse of large quantities of drugs. The risk of overdose is real and can occur at any point in the cycle of abuse.

Death can be a tragic consequence of opiate abuse. The victims of an opiate overdose resulting in death include not only the deceased but also the family and friends left in the wake of losing a loved one.

Saying no to abusing opiates—or any drug—is a primary strategy to stay safe. Peers should support each other in making wise choices and countering the pressures placed on young people today.

Help is available to those who need it. Opiate addiction is not generally something someone can overcome alone, and we should all help ensure anyone who is struggling finds the resources he/she needs.

STATISTICS:

The testimonies in the film are representative of what statistics have shown to be a widespread epidemic. The film presents the following statistics between sections to reinforce themes or express the magnitude of the problem described by the interviewees.

- Approximately **one in five** high school seniors reports misusing prescription drugs at least once in their lifetime.¹
- A 2014 national survey found an estimated 1.4 million people in the U.S. abused a prescription painkiller for **the first time** that year.²
- Most first-time abusers of painkillers obtain them from a **friend or relative**.³
- Nearly **all people** who use heroin also use at least one other drug.⁴

1 Richard A. Miech, Lloyd D. Johnston, Patrick M. O'Malley, Jerald G. Bachman, John E. Schulenberg, *Monitoring the Future: National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975-2014: Volume I, Secondary School Students* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, 2015), 218, http://monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-vol1_2014.pdf.

2 Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, *Behavioral Health Trends in the United States: Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables* (2015), Table 1.1A, <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DetTabs2014/NSDUH-DetTabs2014.pdf>.

3 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Results from the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings* (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), 3, <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUHresultsPDFWHTML2013/Web/NSDUHresults2013.pdf>.

4 Christopher M. Jones PharmD, Joseph Logan, PhD, R. Matthew Gladden, PhD, Michele K. Bohm, MPH, "Vital Signs: Demographic and Substance Use Trends Among Heroin Users – United States, 2002-2013," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 64, no. 26 (2015): 719-725, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6426a3.htm>.

- People who take prescription painkillers can become **addicted** with just one prescription.⁵
- A large percentage of individuals **arrested** for major crimes—including homicide, theft, and assault—are under the influence of illicit drugs.⁶
- In the 1960s, more than 80% of opioid abusers got hooked on heroin first. In the 2000s, 75% of opioid abusers started with **prescription opioids**.⁷
- More than **10 million people** 12 years and older in the U.S. reported nonmedical use of prescription opioids in 2014.²
- Each day, 44 people in the U.S. **die from an overdose** of prescription painkillers.⁵
- More than 93% of those identified as needing treatment for dependence or misuse of an illicit drug believe they do not need **help**.²

5 "Understanding the Epidemic," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: Prescription Drug Overdose*, last modified October 28, 2015, <http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/>.

6 *Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem* (Waltham, MA: Schneider Institute for Health Policy, Brandeis University, 2001), 67, <http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2001/rwjf13550>.

7 Theodore J. Cicero, PhD, Matthew S. Ellis, MPE, Hilary L. Surratt, PhD, Steven P. Kurtz, PhD, "The Changing of Heroin Use in the United States: A Retrospective Analysis of the Past 50 Years," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 7 (2014): 821-826, <http://archpsyc.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1874575>.

INTERVIEWEE PROFILES:

After students view this film, a class discussion—led by a school resource officer, teacher, administrator, or counselor—is recommended.

The storyline of the film portrays the progression of opiate addiction accompanied by the escalation of consequences, as told by the interviewees. The discussion guide's questions require students to recall information from the film. This profile sheet will assist students in making reference to the appropriate interviewee during the discussion; it can be downloaded at: www.FBI.gov/ChasingTheDragon.



Katrina – Former business executive and mother of two who became addicted to opiates after self-medicating with pain pills and alcohol.



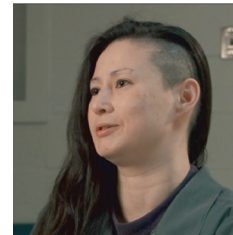
Sarah – Began using marijuana at age 13 and became addicted to opiates after being prescribed oxycodone for injuries related to an automobile accident.



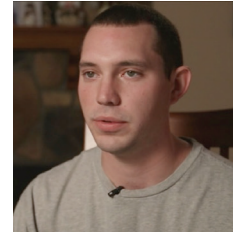
Trish – Mother of Cierra, an A/B honor roll student who took opiates while in high school and became addicted.



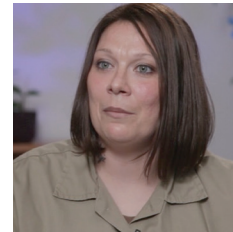
Matt – Began using marijuana at age 11 and became addicted to opiates at age 15.



Julia – Involved in many school activities and was an honor roll student. She began using marijuana at age 11 and eventually used other drugs. She overdosed on opiates four times.



Cory – Enjoyed outdoor activities and was an Eagle Scout. He first used marijuana and eventually tried other drugs. He was addicted to opiates by age 17.



Melissa – Began using marijuana at age 13 and got hooked on oxycodone after a pregnancy. She was arrested on eight occasions for drug abuse and suffered numerous health issues due to multiple overdoses.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

A list of questions is provided below to help organize the discussion in a manner that will help students discover the critical points of the film and draw conclusions they can use to develop strategies to avoid drug abuse. (It may be helpful to write the **highlighted** themes on the board as they are identified during discussion.)

Question 1:

The film began with a statistic: “Approximately one in five high school seniors reports misusing prescriptions drugs at least once in their lifetime.” Using our class as an example, how many students would that be?

Theme Development:

- Show physically by row or number of seats in the classroom how many students the answer represents. The purpose of this demonstration is to get students to recognize this conversation is relevant to them.

Question 2:

What did the opiate-addicted individuals in the film have in common prior to becoming addicted?

Theme Development:

- Draw attention to answers highlighting that the addicted persons in the film had normal and, in some cases, even privileged lives.
- Point to the conclusion that **everyone is at risk** if not informed.
- Some students may identify that most persons used marijuana or other drugs prior to abusing opiates. This issue will be addressed in questions three and four.

Question 3:

What were the ways the people in the film got hooked on opiates?

Theme Development:

- The two “typical” paths leading to opiate abuse are depicted in the film. Some people start using other drugs, which can eventually lead to the use of opiates. Others self-medicate outside the bounds of legitimate medical oversight, often after first having a legitimate prescription.

Question 4:

Many argue that using alcohol, marijuana, or other seemingly “minor” drugs acts as a gateway to stronger, more lethal drugs and addictions. In hearing the real stories of the addicted persons in this video, do you believe there is support for this claim?

Theme Development:

- The interviewee profile sheet and video testimonies show a prevalence of marijuana use prior to opiates.
- Statistic: “Nearly all people who use heroin also use at least one other drug.” (Vital Signs, MMWR 2015)
- Discuss the impact of impaired judgment from abuse of drugs or alcohol and how that may lower inhibitions to try an opiate.

Question 5:

What influence did friends have on the interviewees' use of drugs?

Theme Development:

- Sarah: "I met the crowd who did do stuff. You are who you hang out with."
- Matt: "My buddy said, 'Hey, these will get you high. Let's do some.' I was like, okay."
- Trish: "... the friends helped pick the road that she (Cierra) chose."

Question 6:

What did you learn about how fast someone can become addicted? If someone said to you, "But it's only one pill—you can't get addicted from just one," how would you respond?

Theme Development:

- All interviewees described becoming addicted quickly and needing more and more opiates. Remember, if someone is taking these drugs, they are not "trying"—they are actually "doing."
- Katrina: "I feel I became addicted that day."
- Statistic: "People who take prescription painkillers can become addicted with just one prescription." (CDC, 2015)
- Point to the theme that **opiate addiction can occur quickly**.



Question 7:

How did the people in the film describe their daily routine once opiate addiction set in?

Theme Development:

- Dr. Bassam: "You can't maintain an opiate addiction and a normal life for very long."
- Cory: "I started stealing from my family and friends. ... Whatever money I had in my pocket was all going to it."
- Sarah: "It's a never-ending, vicious cycle. It's the same thing, over and over and over."
- Julia: "Your whole day revolves around it. You go to sleep doing it. You wake up doing it."
- Melissa: "It became my full-time job. The needle was my boss—a very demanding boss."
- All the persons in the film describe **a life-consuming routine**. Talk to students about how an opiate addiction would interfere with their daily lives, including consequences they can relate to. Discuss impact on sports and activities, loss of friends, ability to remain in school, etc.

Question 8:

What did Cory mean when he said he was eventually just taking opiates to "stay well"?

Theme Development:

- Students should identify that the interviewees describe an initial pursuit of getting high, which ultimately becomes more difficult to achieve due to an **increasing tolerance** to opiates. Eventually, opiate-addicted persons need to take the drug to simply keep from going through withdrawal.
- Katrina: "I couldn't even function without 40 pills a day. I was ill like literally every four hours. The chills started setting in ... and I woke up sick."

Question 9:

Since addicted persons need more and more prescription painkillers to get high or “stay well,” what are some consequences they may face that you learned about from the film?

Theme Development:

- Persons addicted to prescription painkillers often turn to more aggressive methods of ingesting the drugs (oral, smoking, snorting, injecting). Eventually, many will turn to heroin, which is cheaper than pills.
- People addicted to opiates might turn to theft, prostitution, or other crimes to obtain money to finance their addiction. The grip of addiction can lead an ordinarily law-abiding person to cross legal boundaries he/she would normally have respected.
- Ask for examples from the film of uncharacteristic or illegal behavior as a result of addiction:
 - Matt: Prescription fraud
 - Cory: Stole from family and friends
 - Sarah: Prostitution
 - Julia: Turned to stripping
 - Katrina: Prescription fraud
 - Cierra: Turned to stripping, stole checks from grandmother, theft from family, spent \$800 a week, convicted felon at 18
- Point out the prevalence of legal consequences, like incarceration, among the interviewees, including the fact that Sarah, Melissa, and Julia are in jail during their interviews.
- Discuss the potential impact on a person’s future from a felony conviction:
 - Career limitations – clearances, military, positions of trust
 - Cannot vote
 - Cannot own a firearm
 - Social stigma

Question 10:

What are the similarities and differences between prescription opiates and heroin?

Theme Development:

Similarities:

- Both are opiates and highly addictive.
- Both can be abused in similar manners.
- Both are easily accessible. Trish felt her daughter was able to obtain the heroin more easily.
- Katrina: “There is absolutely no difference in my mind between a heroin addict and pill addict. We both will do anything to get it. ... You’re both addicted; you both go through the withdrawals.”
- Julia: “It’s all the same. ... One is prescribed to you, and one you go cop on the street.”

Differences:

- Heroin is often cut with harmful substances like meat tenderizer, which can lead to major tissue damage, dangerous infections, loss of limbs, cardiac arrest, and other severe health consequences.
- The strength of heroin can be unpredictable, resulting in frequent overdoses.
- Heroin is cheaper and has no medical use.
- Prescription opiates can be used for legitimate medical purposes.

Question 11:

What were the main reasons users switched from prescription pain medicine to using heroin?

Theme Development:

- Cost is one of the main reasons. Heroin is a cheaper substitute.
- Sarah: “You can get four shots for the price of one pill.”
- Matt: “...then you go for heroin because it’s cheaper.”
- Cory: “It was cheaper, so of course I got into it.”
- Trish: “I think she was able to access more heroin easily [sic] than the pills”

Question 12:

What were some of the health consequences of opiate abuse discussed by the persons in the film?

Theme Development:

- Health consequences discussed in the film include:
- Hepatitis C and other bloodborne pathogens
- MRSA infections
- Abscesses
- Overdoses



Question 13:

How did people in the film describe opiate withdrawal?

Theme Development:

- Ms. Taylor (expert): “...withdrawal...looks like extraordinary physical and muscular pain, and very few people can actually manage it.”
- Matt: “You feel like you just want to die.”
- Cory: “It’s just something I never want to experience again. It is the worst feeling ever.”
- Sarah: “You will do anything to make it stop.”
- Julia: “... 15 times worse than the flu. You would seriously probably rather just be dead.”
- Katrina: “It was horrific.”

Question 14:

What did Melissa do after she overdosed on heroin and had to be revived using a defibrillator?

Theme Development:

- Melissa left the hospital and purchased some of the same heroin that had just caused her to go into cardiac arrest.
- Ask students what this example suggests about the implications of opiate abuse on rational thought.
- Even though overdoses are common among opiate abusers, this reality is still not enough to deter continued abuse by many.

Question 15:

Were Kirstyn and Cierra the only victims when they passed away?

Theme Development:

- Point out the broader tragedy of **death** as a result of narcotics overdose.
- Katrina: “I am still in shock.”
- Trish: “... this doesn’t just affect you. It affects everybody in your family for the rest of their lives. That we’re the ones stuck here missing you.”

Question 16:

Katrina said that the kids in attendance at Kirstyn’s funeral were high. Trish said that her daughter died six days after her release from jail, where she had received treatment every day for seven months. Cory continued to abuse opiates despite the death of his girlfriend. What do these events say about the long-term hold of opiates on persons who abuse them?

Theme Development:

- These details and others throughout the film show the stranglehold of the drugs on the users. The choice to abuse an opiate can have long-term consequences.



Question 17:

What advice did we get from the interviewees at the end of the film?

Theme Development:

- Sarah: “Listen to what they say. Say no. Just say no. You’re not uncool for **saying no**. You’re more cool for saying no, I think. I wish I could have said no. If I could go back and do it all over, I would definitely go back and say no.”
- Melissa: “It’s not worth it. ... It will get you. You are no different than anybody else.”
- Julia: “If you want to be a flunky, go ahead and get high. Go ahead and do it. But ... I’ve been there done that, and I wouldn’t recommend it.”
- Trish: “And there is help out there. And you’ve got to take it. Don’t think you can do it alone, because you can’t.”
- Cory: “It’s just not worth it at all, you know. If I could go back, if I knew now what I know about this ... if I could go back, I would do it all different. Starting with that first pill. I wouldn’t touch it.”

Question 18:

After watching it, why do you think the FBI and DEA are putting this film out to high school students specifically?

Theme Development:

- Even after providing their stories for the film, several of the interviewees returned to abusing opiates. Despite their strong warnings to viewers, the grip of addiction overpowered their own advice. This should help students understand the importance of awareness campaigns that reach people early—before they get hooked.
- Point out the importance of perception and how a “drug culture” can create an environment that puts students at risk in the absence of a fact-based counter narrative.
- Help students to discover that they are the ones who are in the best position to **help** each other resist temptation, and as a group they have an obligation to stand up and take control of their own culture. Their voices matter.

CULMINATING ACTIVITIES:

School administrators are encouraged to broaden their current anti-drug curricula to include activity-based learning where students can process information in a variety of formats to generate practical ideas, form decisions in advance of temptation, and raise general awareness. **The following activities can be used to integrate the lessons learned from the preceding class discussion:**

1. Construct a flow chart or diagram that includes the following key components of an effective drug avoidance strategy:
 - Say no.
 - Help is available.
 - Support each other to overcome peer pressure.
 - Do not believe “just trying” something is possible—trying is doing.
 - Never take a pill that has not been prescribed by a qualified physician for a legitimate reason.
 - Do not go to parties where drugs are present and avoid situations where drugs may be offered.
 - Inform a parent, guardian, school administrator, school resource officer, or teacher if you are aware of someone abusing drugs; you can remain anonymous.
2. Draft a proposal to a state representative, your school district’s superintendent, or to a federal, state, or local law enforcement agency about an initiative to raise awareness of teen drug abuse. Use text-based evidence to support your recommendation.
3. Create a painting, drawing, digital image, or a collage that depicts what you think someone going through the pain of withdrawal might feel. (Students can look to the Internet to find inspiration in works such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*.)

4. Suppose a friend or family member has started to abuse prescription or illegal drugs. You have noticed a change in their behavior and are deeply concerned for their well-being. What would you say to this person to try to convince them to quit using drugs and get the help they need? How would you convey this message to them (in person, via e-mail, phone call, text)? Draft a message or script based on the medium in which you would communicate.
5. Working in a small group, draft several steps you would like to present to your principal about establishing a culture in school opposed to drug use. This campaign/movement may include a catch phrase, meme, flyer, video, or activities aimed at establishing a culture where drugs are “**not** cool” and “everyone is **not** doing it.” Consider how social media can be used to spread your message.





Additional resources and guidance can be found at:

www.FBI.gov/ChasingTheDragon