

JOURNEY TO RECOVERY

INSIDE OPIOID ADDICTION

DISCUSSION GUIDE



BACKGROUND

Addiction to opioids, both prescription pain medications and heroin, are ravaging Kentucky and the nation. More people die annually from drug overdoses than in car accidents. Treatment can be expensive and hard to find, and stigma often keeps people from accessing the treatment that is available.

Journey to Recovery, a one-hour documentary produced by KET, takes an in-depth look at the opioid crisis and how communities are responding, highlights the range of treatment options available for people with opioid use disorder, and lifts up stories of recovery and hope.

KET is making available this program and discussion guide to encourage valuable discussion among community groups about the opioid epidemic and what they can do to create solutions.

HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

This documentary is best viewed in its entirety, over one or two sessions.

Before watching the documentary, consider asking participants to share their own experiences or observations about the opioid epidemic. What concerns them most? What don't they understand? What questions do they have?

After viewing the documentary, begin by asking participants to summarize the main messages and themes of the program and to share what they learned. Below are quotes from the documentary grouped by themes. Depending on the interests of your audience, you can use these quotes and questions to explore certain themes in more depth.

After your screening is over, let us know how it went! Email producers Justin Allen and Laura Krueger at opioids@ket.org. We want to hear from you!

THEME: VIEWING ADDICTION AS A DISEASE

Quotes from the documentary:

Caleb Dunn: *I'm not going to lie. Before I really got into UNITE, I had this opinion that if you are a drug abuser, if you abuse drugs, then you have made the conscious choice to ruin your life or the lives of your children.*

Carl Varney: *I hated who I had become and I hated that I was totally enslaved by this drug and these stupid pills. And I would think, "Dangit, Carl you're a man. You should be able to stop this."*

Question: Despite evidence that addiction is a disease, many people still see drug abuse as a choice. Do you see addiction as a choice or a disease? Why?

Question: How does the debate over whether addiction is a disease or choice impact policy and how communities respond to people who are suffering from opioid use disorder?

THEME: THE STIGMA OF ADDICTION

Quote from the documentary:

Carl Varney: *If somebody in somebody's family is addicted then the family does everything they can to hide that fact.*

Question: What evidence of stigma do you see in your own community or family?

Question: Language is important. How does calling someone an "addict" or "junkie" versus referring to them as "having a substance use disorder?" perpetuate stigma?

THEME: UNDERSTANDING MEDICATION-ASSISTED TREATMENT

Quotes from the documentary:

Nora Volkow: *If I had a hypertension disorder, I would love to be able to handle it without medication. But while in some instances it's possible, in many it's not.*

Van Ingram: *If these are medications that are approved by the FDA, the research and science behind them is there –I think our opioid problems are so bad and so many people in Kentucky are suffering from this disorder that we can't afford to thumb our nose at anything that might work.*

Question: What are the benefits of medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorder as you understand them after watching this program?

Question: If a doctor prescribes a medication for a person's substance use problems, should the rest of society care? If so, why and in what circumstances?

THEME: TOO MANY PAINKILLERS, TOO LITTLE EDUCATION

Question: Both Carl Varney and Alex Elswick, who are shown in the documentary, became addicted to opioids after receiving them for medical reasons. Do you think patients are educated enough about the dangers of opioids when they are prescribed?

Question: A law was passed in Kentucky in 2017 that limited doctors to prescribing three days of opioids for acute injuries or health events. What is your assessment of this law?

THEME: DRUG COURT AND TREATMENT BEHIND BARS

Quotes from the documentary:

Judge Holbrook: *We are spending a fortune on incarcerating people, especially those who are what I would call the “but for” test – “but for” the fact that they’re an addict they would not in the criminal justice system.*

Jason Merrick: *In a place that is seemingly hopeless and a lot of people would say, “I’m at the end of my rope;” it’s a blessing to be able to offer treatment, valuable quality treatment that is putting a stop to that revolving door that we all hear about.*

Question: We have seen how drug court and jail substance abuse treatment programs can be effective, particularly those that incorporate medication assisted treatment. Why is it important that as a society, we focus on these types of programs?

THEME: THE ROLE OF FAMILY

Quote from documentary:

Robert Dupont: The key long term to dealing with the problem of heroin addiction and drug abuse more generally is the family. And right now what happens to families is they’ll send them to treatment over and over again and they just relapse and go back again. There needs to be a management and monitoring of those people. And we need to empower families to take responsibility and help them.

Question: Programs for “family empowerment” are not widespread. What would or could that look like in your community, particularly for families that are struggling with other issues such as finances, housing, trauma etc.?

THEME: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

Quote from documentary:

Alex Elswick: I had to have a stable place to live. I had to have help finding a job because I had a criminal record and I had debt. I had bad credit. So try getting an apartment, try getting a car, try getting a job. I needed somebody to really help me get back on my feet. I really needed to be surrounded that way.

Question: How do these social and economic burdens sometimes referred to as “cumulative disadvantages” impact a person’s ability to achieve long term-sobriety? What creative solutions can we develop to help individuals overcome these challenges?

THEME: RECOVERY AND THE HEALING POWER OF COMMUNITY

Quote from documentary:

Tara Moseley: We don’t see stories of people celebrating nine years of recovery. Or people that for the first time are going to college after they have begun their recovery. Or they are buying their first home. Or they are getting married. I mean, those are success stories.

Question: How can we better share the success stories? What is the role of stigma in keeping those stories from being told?

THEME: THE ROLE OF POLICY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Quote from documentary:

Leana Wen: Nationwide, only 11 percent of patients with addiction are able to get the help they need, which we would not find acceptable for anything else.

Question: How can policy make a difference in getting people the help they need?

Question: What can you contribute to addressing this epidemic?



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