

PreSCRIPTION for DISASTER

An interactive theatrical performance with accompanying discussion

Facilitator's Notes

General overview: This activity is designed to showcase a theatrical performance as a tool to discuss controversial issues surrounding the abuse of prescription drugs. Facilitators will introduce each act, guide each discussion block, and interject pertinent information and statistics. However, the most important component of the activity relates to the student participants' personal reflection, interaction with their peers in the workshop, and group discussion following the viewing of each act.

Activity Agenda

1) Introduction of facilitators and student participants

Some facilitators may lead parts of the workshop discussions; others may mingle among the participants during their small group discussions to provide input or answer questions. After introducing the facilitators, ask students to form small groups (3-6 participants). Ask each participant to introduce him or herself to their small group.

2) Introduction of performance and discussion

The student booklet includes the following introduction:

Americans are using prescription drugs at unprecedented rates. In 2010, Americans purchased nearly 4 billion prescription medications¹. Unfortunately, we are becoming a growing culture that self-diagnoses and self-prescribes, expecting quick fixes to any health-related problem. These attitudes underlie a phrase that is being used to describe us at every age, in America's drug-taking society, — "Generation Rx."

In 2010, approximately 7 million Americans (age 12 or older) abused a prescription medication². However, the average age for starting the abuse of these medications remains 21-23 years², representing the average college student. This discussion accompanies "The InterACT Play", and together, explores possible reasons underlying these statistics, as well as addresses many of the issues faced by our youth, college students and society as a result of prescription drug abuse.

3) Procedure for activity

Following each act of the theatrical performance (time blocks indicated below), ask the student participants to take a few moments to reflect on each question individually. They may feel free to write notes in the workshop booklet. After self-reflection, instruct them to discuss the questions in small groups. Finally, conduct a group discussion and ask students to provide input. At this point additional information or statistics may be interjected.

4) Discussion blocks

ACT 1: What is Prescription Drug Abuse? [0:00-10:48]

What behaviors do you classify as prescription drug abuse?

- Taking somebody else's prescription drug.
- Taking more of a prescription drug than instructed.
- Taking a prescription drug for reasons other than that prescribed.

Terrence uses Vicodin® because he was bored. Terrence clearly was not following instructions and took Vicodin® for reasons other than that prescribed (sleeping), indicating that Terrence clearly abused his Vicodin® prescription.

How do college students justify their abuse of prescription drugs?

College students may justify their abuse by stating:

- "Prescription drugs are legal substances."
- "Prescription drugs can't be dangerous."
- "Prescription drugs can't be addictive."

Regarding the first justification, you may remind students that possession of a prescription drug without a written prescription is a felony offense and punishable by jail time. Regarding the second and third justification, ask the students to think about the first question on pg.2: "Would you consider the abuse of prescription medications to be a safe alternative to using illicit street drugs?"

As a follow-up to the above discussion, it may be helpful to review the structures of OxyContin® and Heroin on pg.2 of the student workbook. Ask the students: "Do you think these two structures are chemically similar?" Students will answer, "yes". Then ask the students: "If they have a similar chemical structure, do you think they bind the same drug target in the brain?" Most students will answer, "yes". Lastly, ask students: "If they bind the same drug target, do you think they produce similar intoxicating effects?" The scientific answer to this question is, "yes". A similar comparison can be made with Cocaine & stimulant drugs such as Ritalin®, as well as Rohypnol and sedative drugs such as Valium®.

Use this discussion to transition to the next act. One transition could be: "Are there consequences to abusing Heroin? (Yes). Since OxyContin® is similar to Heroin, do you think an abuser could experience negative consequences upon abusing OxyContin® and other prescription drugs? (Yes). Let's watch Steven's story as we think about this question."

ACT 2: Is abusing prescription drugs really that dangerous? [10:48-15:39]

Steven's abuse of Adderall led him to try and abuse other prescription drugs. Do you think Adderall is a gateway drug among youth today? Why or why not?

In 2009, The National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported that 6.4% of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 used Adderall® for nonmedical purposes in the past year². Because of the many misconceptions students hold towards prescription drugs, many students that abuse Adderall® for studying purposes may also be inclined to abuse other substances. It may be helpful to use student's responses to this question to initiate a conversation about the abuse of Adderall® on college campuses.

Think about both Steven and Mike's experiences with prescription drugs.

What consequences might abusers of prescription drugs experience?

Steven's experience is based on a true story, indicating that health effects, including heart attacks and addiction, are very real consequences from abusing prescription drugs.

Below are common consequences from abusing prescription medications:

- Health effects relating to the pharmacological actions or side effects of the drug in the body:
 1. Opiates (OxyContin®, Vicodin®): respiratory depression, nausea, constipation, unconsciousness, addiction, death
 2. Stimulants (Adderall®, Ritalin®): irritability, anxiousness, paranoia, reduced appetite, respiratory failure, stroke, seizures, heart failure, addiction, death
 3. Depressants (Valium®, Xanax®): lowered blood pressure, confusion, fatigue, gastrointestinal disturbances, dizziness, memory loss, depression, respiratory depression, addiction, death
- Physical harm due to accidents, sexual or physical abuse, organ damage
- Social/emotional effects involving changes in relationships, depression, isolation, etc.
- Legal effects due to the fact that it is against federal laws to obtain prescription medications without a prescription.

Mike does not indicate that he has experienced any negative consequences. However, students could predict potential consequences that people like Mike may experience, even if they do not acknowledge them publicly.

Mike believes that addiction to prescription drugs remains a choice. What do you think?

Addiction occurs when one continues to abuse a drug despite negative consequences. For example, Steven was clearly addicted to prescription drugs. Drug addiction is not a voluntary behavior—as Annie states, “no one chooses to become a drug addict.” Because addiction is a brain disease, the continued use of drugs changes how your brain functions, including impairing your ability to make decisions, think clearly, and control your behaviors. Every person is genetically different; therefore, how many times a person must use a drug before becoming addicted will vary from person to person. Mike likely exists somewhere between the continuum of abuse transitioning to addiction. Therefore, while abusing prescription drugs may remain a choice for Mike now, over time it will likely become a compulsive drug-seeking behavior and no longer a choice.

As a follow-up to this conversation, you may also ask students: “Mike and Annie offer very different perceptions of a prescription drug addict. What is your perception?”

Possible answers:

Prescription drug addicts challenge the common stereotype of a traditional “drug addict.” Because the reasons for prescription drug abuse often involve self-medication, many prescription drug abusers and addicts are educated, respected, and rational individuals. In addition, as Steven later points out, the act of “taking a pill” requires no practice nor does it draw attention to the user. These points reinforce that prescription drug abuse does not discriminate and challenges our perceptions of a drug addict.

ACT 3: What do you think? [15:39-19:00]

At the end, each character summarizes their thoughts towards prescription drug abuse.

What character do you identify with the most?

This question provides students an opportunity to reflect on their own opinion concerning prescription drug abuse after watching the performance in its entirety.

What questions would you ask each character? How do you think those characters would respond?

As stated earlier, the live filming of this performance was interactive—that is, at the end of the performance, all of the actors stayed in character. Below is a list of questions that some members of the live audience asked specific characters.

Allow students the opportunity to synthesize questions for each character. For each question posed, ask the class as a whole how they think the specific character would respond to that question. If the list below includes the question asked by the student, you may wish to play the specific video clip that accompanies this question. To do this, open the video file labeled “Q&A with the characters” and fast forward to the indicated time period. If students are not synthesizing any questions for the characters, you may ask the students the questions below to facilitate discussion.

Interactive questions to facilitate discussion:

1. Question for **Mike**: (0:00-0:50)
 - Why do you think abuse is a choice for you but it wasn’t for Steven or Annie?
2. Question for **Annie** or **Steven**: (9:24-11:20)
 - What advice do you have for Mike?
3. Question for **Abby**: (11:20-12:10)
 - How do you deal with peer pressure?
4. Question for **Mike**: (22:20-25:10)
 - Do you think your choice to abuse only affects you? Do you think your choice to abuse will affect others?
5. Question for **Terrence**: (26:05-28:10)
 - What makes you different from Annie and Steven? Why do you think you can stop and Mike can’t?

