

Treatment for Teen Heroin Use

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In a several-part series, Mitzi MacKenzie, MSW, explores themes of heroin addiction in young people, including how to best identify indicators that your teen may be using and, most importantly, what to do next.



Here's the all-important question: What do we do now that we know our child is submerged in the world of heroin? The answer: Initiate your journey down the path of education, insight and awareness.

A successful recovery process follows a precise course. The first step is to reach out immediately to one or more of the many resources in your community. This would include contacting your family practitioner and requesting referrals for a qualified psychiatrist and therapist. Also, communicate with your child's school and request its support. Such interaction could provide a massive wake-up call to the institution in terms of opening its eyes and proactively dealing with a more-than-likely bigger problem, that is, that multiple children on campus have the same problem as your child. In addition, find a chemical-dependency support group or meeting in your area. And on a more personal level, confide in a trustworthy friend or family member—one who will listen, give constructive feedback and, most importantly, not judge the circumstances.

The treatment process can be "strange medicine" to absorb; yet, trust the process and keep moving. The goal is appropriate treatment that provides the best care for the maximum length of time possible. You will choose a facilitator to guide your family through this process. This is significant if not strategic. (Recall the first article of this series where I adamantly stated how the proven skill and knowledge of the clinician was essential.) An effective psychiatrist, along with a knowledgeable therapist, will walk you through the process with minimal chaos.

The most effective treatment model is derived from evidence-based practices that have continually demonstrated their success in achieving sobriety. Think of the process as being suspended on a rickety ladder, with the ultimate goal of climbing down one rung at a time to eventually rest both feet on solid ground. It starts with residential in-patient treatment for a minimum of 35 days, though 90 days is better. The second tier is step-down treatment to an intensive out-patient program lasting approximately eight weeks, followed by individual therapy. The next and most important step is residing in a sober-living home for the entire treatment process; this provides for optimal care and affords the client with the best overall chance for success in maintaining sobriety, mainly because he or she is around and supported by people with the same goals.

There are roadblocks, however, particularly financial. Insurance carriers can also be an impediment, for not all pay for the same services. In fact, what a carrier will or won't pay for is very arbitrary; nonetheless, finance will always be in the equation. But always remember these two facts: First, any treatment is better than none; and second, you can't put a price on saving a child's life.

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