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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.**



Heroin (H). A scary word for most. The reality is that H has become the self-medication choice of the late-teen and young adult population in our community, especially in the affluent neighborhoods. Many of our young people are captivated with the drug's romance, regardless of type, be it street or synthetic (prescribed opioids).

Why would a clinician refer to a life-threatening drug like heroin as romantic? In order to treat this addiction in teenagers and young adults successfully, a therapist must understand the culture of the substance and how it has become romanticized in our communities. It is with this knowledge that a clinician sharpens his or her ability to implement the appropriate intervention without hesitation.

The perfect recipe in understanding the pathology of the young opiate addict is this: intimate knowledge of the heroin culture; an informed clinical perspective of the individual user; and the current behaviors occurring within the family system. The entire family of a young heroin addict must be treated. The Best Practice within my setting supports that this is the only road to success; the family needs as much support and education as the addict.

My experience in treating family systems—those who are living with young opiate addicts—has given me the ultimate viewing window into families that are simply blown apart. Yet, the young addict often provides an eloquent, if not enigmatic, perspective of heroin that tends to describe the drug as a nurturing, loving best friend and companion. Hence, the romance of the drug.

There are impediments and roadblocks to treating these people. Time is the clinician's first enemy, and denial within the family system ranks extremely close behind in the initial phase of addressing the challenge. Defining, accurately, the level of chaos within the family system as a whole is the centerpiece to the broken puzzle. I share this with the reader because I educate a lot on searching for a clinician that has the skill to accurately assess the addict and the challenges within the family that hinder the treatment process. Without that skill, the crucial timeline and denial is overlooked or missed entirely.

### Meet Mitzi

Mitzi MacKenzie specializes in addiction and mental health concerns in adolescents, teens and young adults. With a master's degree in Clinical Social Work from Arizona State University, she is also an experienced Interventionist for families that need appropriate assessment and placement for loved ones who require residential treatment and subsequent aftercare. She currently works in a private practice and in a hospital-based intensive outpatient setting which both address mental health and addiction challenges. [www.arcadiaangels.com](http://www.arcadiaangels.com).