Empathy in the Face of Addiction

Fact Sheet

- In 2016, 2,816 Canadians died from opioid-related overdoses. (Macleans)
- At the heart of the national epidemic, called a “crisis” by Canada’s chief public health officer, are two different, but related, types of drugs: prescription painkillers and illicit street drugs, such as heroin and fentanyl. (Globe and Mail)
- The crisis has reached every part of Canada, with small cities and towns—such as Moncton, Kelowna and Regina—showing among the highest rates of hospitalizations resulting from opioid poisoning. (Globe and Mail)
- Safe-injection sites offer a supervised location for people to use pre-obtained drugs, as well as a concentrated area of social and medical services for communities at risk (including counselling, treatment for hepatitis, HIV, etc.); this is part of a strategy called harm reduction. (Global News)
- Toronto’s first sanctioned safe-injection site opened in November 2017, joining Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal and cities across the country in providing the service. (CBC & Global News)
- At various times, to respond to a lack of safe-injection sites operating in areas of need, roughly 30 “pop up” sites have been run by activists and medical practitioners. (Macleans)
- Experts point to a funnel effect, where people begin using legitimate prescription painkillers before becoming addicted and turning to cheaper illicit street drugs. (The New Yorker)
- Recently, an even more dangerous drug called fentanyl has made its way to Canada, which is estimated to have caused half the overdose deaths in British Columbia and Alberta in 2016. (Macleans)
- To respond to the latest wave of overdoses, universities across the country, including the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and the University of King’s College in Halifax, are providing naloxone kits for students on campus; naloxone is an antidote to opioid overdose. (Toronto Star)
- Early childhood trauma, including physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect, significantly increases the risk for several psychiatric disorders in adulthood, including addiction. The National Survey of Adolescents, conducted in the United States, found that teens who had experienced physical or sexual abuse were three times more likely to report substance abuse issues than those without a history of trauma. (US National Library of Medicine)

Key Terms

- **Addiction**—A complex condition, addiction is a disease that results in compulsive behaviour and dependence on substances despite harmful consequences. People with addiction can develop physical reliance on substances, often distorting their thinking and behaviour and taking over their lives.
- **Empathy**—The ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
- **Opioid**—A lot of different drugs, including both prescription medications and illicit street drugs, are called opioids because they are derived from the same plant and all target the same receptors in the brain. Opioids are legitimately used in pain management, helping people recovering from serious injuries or surgery. They also impact the brain’s reward system, resulting in a euphoric—or high—feeling. Opioids are highly addictive and dependence on them can be fatal.
Classroom Activity - Grades 9 to 12:

Essential Question:
- How can empathy contribute to overcoming the current opioid crisis in North America?

Learning Goals:
Students will:
- Explore the current opioid crisis in North America
- Understand the factors that can lead to drug addiction
- Recognize what resources are available to support people in overcoming their addictions

Discussion:
1. What is an opioid? What is fentanyl?
2. What factors contributed to Ruston Baldwin’s drug addiction? Is there a connection between mental illness and substance abuse?
3. Why does Baldwin benefit more from going to a rehabilitation program than going to prison?
4. What local, provincial and federal government supports are available to assist individuals who want to overcome their addiction?
5. The title of the article uses the term “empathy.” Is empathy a solution for addiction?
6. What do the authors mean when they say: “Instead of relying on stigma and stereotypes of addicts as immoral and depraved, we should see them like Baldwin—as people in pain, in need of help and capable of so much more”?

Dive Deeper:

Statistics:
- As of 2016, in Canada, over 2,861 deaths have been opioid-related deaths.
- Apparent opioid related deaths were at 8.8 percent of a population of 100,000.
- Western Canada has experienced the highest percentage of opioid-related deaths.
- Most apparent opioid-related deaths occurred among males (74 percent) and individuals between the ages of 30 and 39 (28 percent).
- From January to June 2017, 74 percent of apparent opioid-related deaths involved fentanyl.


2. After the activity, explain to students that all five statistics were true. Place the terms opioid and fentanyl on the front board. Ask them, what do you know about these terms? What is an opioid? What is fentanyl? Explain to students that opioids are drugs that act on the nervous system to relieve pain. Continued use and abuse can lead to physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms. They come in tablets, capsules or liquid. Fentanyl is a type of opioid. Source: [www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids](www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids)

3. Show students the video “Your Brain on Fentanyl,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0tW8FB8m1g](www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0tW8FB8m1g). In pairs, ask students to discuss and answer the following questions.
- What is the opioid crisis?
- What is the effect of fentanyl on your body? How does your brain react to fentanyl?
- Why is using fentanyl an issue?
- Why do you become addicted to fentanyl?
- What are the factors in the increase of illegal fentanyl supply?
- What are some of the ways governments can support those who are addicted to fentanyl or opioids?

4. As a class, ask students to reflect on the statistics from the activity they participated in at the beginning of the lesson. Using the information from the video, did any of the statistics surprise you? How does a person die an opioid-related death?

Educator’s Note: In the following activity students will be encouraged to share their feelings, opinions and personal experiences. Make sure to review classroom guidelines about respect and appropriate use of language to create a safe and inclusive environment where all students feel comfortable participating.

Part 1
1. Place the labels True, False and Unsure on three sides of the classroom. Write the following statistics on the front board. Ask students to choose if they are true or false, or if they are unsure about the statistic. Have students move to the label they associate with the statistic.
5. In small groups, have students read the Global Voices article “Empathy in the Face of Addiction.” After students have read the article, allocate two discussion questions to each small group and have them discuss and answer these questions. Have students present their responses to the class. Students can choose one person in the group to present their answers or all members of the group can present.

6. In the same small groups, ask students, using the Internet, to research the affects opioids, specifically fentanyl, have on the human body. Provide students with chart paper and have each group outline a stencil of the human body and label the parts affected and the consequences of opioid consumption.

7. On an exit ticket or orally, ask students to respond the questions: what is the opioid crisis? How is it affecting people in their society?

Part 2

1. Show students the following two videos “The New Face of Fentanyl Addiction,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG70kTLI57w (3:02) and “Dramatic Turnaround for Fentanyl Addict,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=9r90sfzBLz4 (2:18).

2. On the front board, draw a T-Chart with the labels Baldwin and Kati. Have students reflect back to the Global Voices article “Empathy in the Face of Addiction”. As a class, discuss and compare the stories of Baldwin and Kati. Have them consider:
   - What was the cause of their opioid addictions?
   - How did the opioid affect them?
   - How did they overcome their addictions?
   - What supports did they require to overcome their addictions?

3. Ask students, why is empathy a tool to support individuals who are addicted to substances? Is empathy the only way to support individuals who have addictions?

4. In small groups, research the ways your local communities, provincial or federal governments are supporting individuals who have been affected by substance abuse. Have students consider the following questions:
   - What supports are available for individuals who are substance abusers?
   - Are there any current policies in place to assist individuals?
   - What are some of the root causes of substance abuse?
   - What are some of the strategies individuals can use to overcome their addiction?
   - Is there enough support available to assist individuals recovering from a drug addiction? What more needs to be done?

Website:
- Toronto Central Health Line: www.torontocentralhealthline.ca/listServices.aspx?id=10937
- Drug & Alcohol Helpline: www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca/
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: www.camh.ca/en/hospital/Pages/home.aspx
- SMART Recovery: www.smartrecovery.org/

Educator’s Note: A gallery walk is a discussion and presentation technique to actively engage students as they walk through the classroom. Student work in small groups to share ideas and respond to meaningful questions, documents, images, texts and problem-solving situations.

5. After students have completed their research, have them create a poster, PowerPoint presentation or infographic. Have them present to these to the class and/or school community using a gallery walk.