

Opioids & Your Brain

How Have You Been Feeling Lately?



SELF CHECK

 **Write down any that sound like you in the past few weeks or months:**

- ☐ I've used opioids (or wanted to), even knowing how badly they've messed up my life
- ☐ I've thought about fentanyl or pills even when I wasn't around them
- ☐ I've felt numb, hopeless, or like nothing brings me joy unless I'm high
- ☐ I've gone through withdrawal and wanted to give up just to make it stop
- ☐ I've lied, stolen, or hurt people to get opioids, and still felt pulled back in
- ☐ I've overdosed or lost someone to opioids, but still find myself wanting to use
- ☐ I've told myself I'd stop, but still went back to using
- ☐ I feel like opioids still have control over my thoughts or body
- ☐ I want to be sober but part of me is still scared of how hard it might be

If you wrote down three or more of the options above, this may be a sign that opioids have a strong hold on your brain or body. That doesn't mean you're weak, it just means your brain is still healing.

Opioid addiction is a medical condition that changes your chemistry and decision-making. If you're struggling, do not give up. You can overcome this, but you need support, structure, and a real plan to rebuild.

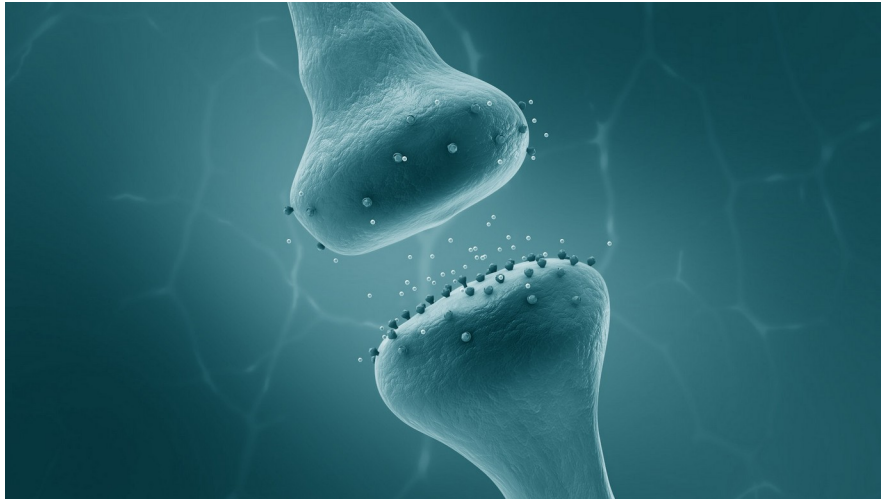
The fact that you're here, reflecting, means you haven't given up. And that matters!

Post Video Reflection:

Hopefully you found the Opioids video helpful! It showed just how powerful your environment can be, and how even without cravings, being around the wrong people, places, or habits can quietly pull you back in.

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How Opioids Rewire the Brain



Opioids change the way your brain works. Over time, they start to take over the reward system, which is the part of the brain that helps you feel pleasure, motivation, and satisfaction.

When you first use opioids, your brain releases a rush of dopamine, which is literally a “feel-good” chemical. But repeated use can cause your brain to rely on the drug for that feeling. Eventually, the natural dopamine system gets weaker and faulty. So things that used to make you feel good, like food, music, or people, just don’t hit the same.

This is why many people in recovery feel flat, unmotivated, or depressed in the early stages. But it’s NOT permanent. With time and the right support, your brain can heal.

 **What’s one activity, hobby, or positive experience you used to enjoy, something that gave you a natural sense of pleasure or motivation before opioids?**

Start doing one thing a day/week that you used to enjoy, maybe such as the thing you mentioned above. It’s okay if things don’t feel the same right now. That’s part of what opioids do...they hijack your brain’s reward system, making it harder to enjoy things that used to make you feel good. Typical things that would typically induce pleasure / release dopamine in the brain include laughter, exercise, deep breathing, music, meditation, playing games (sports, video games, etc) or eating a good meal.

So here’s the hopeful part: your brain can start to feel joy again. It just takes time, consistency, and small steps. You need to retrain your brain to enjoy healthy habits instead of a detrimental one like opioid use.

Opioids & Your Brain

Recognizing Triggers



What are Triggers and Why do They Matter so Much?

When you use opioids, your brain releases a strong surge of dopamine, the chemical tied to reward and survival (think primal instincts). Over time, your brain learns to link that dopamine “high” with certain people, places, feelings, or situations. This is called classical conditioning, the same process that makes you crave food when you smell it cooking.

Your brain builds strong links between opioids and your past experiences. Over time, your brain creates shortcuts, like little equations:

This place = time I used opioids

This person = someone I used with

This feeling (like stress or sadness) = I felt better when I used

Even when you're sober, those shortcuts stay in your brain. The moment you see that place, person, or feel that stress again, your brain lights up like a switch. It releases anticipatory dopamine, a chemical signal that says, “Get ready, relief is coming.”

The problem is: that dopamine rush happens **before you even use**. That's what creates the sudden wave of craving, and why triggers can feel so overwhelming.

Opioid cravings don't just happen randomly, they're often sparked by triggers. Triggers can be people, places, feelings, or memories that remind the brain of using. Let's explore the different types of triggers and why they matter.

Common Triggers for Opioid Cravings

1. Stress and Decision-Making

Stress disrupts good decision-making. During tough times, your brain may recall opioids as a source of relief.

2. HALT: Basic Needs Matter

Hunger, anger, loneliness, or tiredness weaken self-control. Managing these needs helps protect against urges.

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Handling Urges and Cravings

Urges and cravings are normal in recovery. They don't mean you are failing; they are just signals in the brain that you don't really have control over. Learning how to ride them out without acting on them builds serious strength.

Step 1: What Happens When You Get an Urge?

Many people report: *(Check any that sound like you)*

- ☐ Body feels tense or restless
- ☐ Thinking 'just one time' thoughts
- ☐ Feeling like the craving will never end
- ☐ Feeling desperate or trapped
- ☐ You start to convince yourself it is "deserved" or "earned" because of a hard day or stress
- ☐ You feel hopeless or think "what is the point?"



What thoughts or feelings do you have when you are having urges/cravings?

Step 2: Pick One Reaction You Checked



Describe how you could respond differently next time you feel that urge:

Step 3: Your 5-Minute Plan

Next, write down two quick actions you could take to ride out a craving for just 5 minutes without using (example: deep breathing, walking, distracting yourself):
