



How Therapeutic Communities Are Responding with Solutions to the Synthetic Drug Epidemic

**COMMISSION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS
68TH SESSION**



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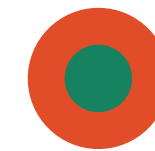
Edward Carlson, CEO, Odyssey House Louisiana Inc. (USA)

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Moderator:

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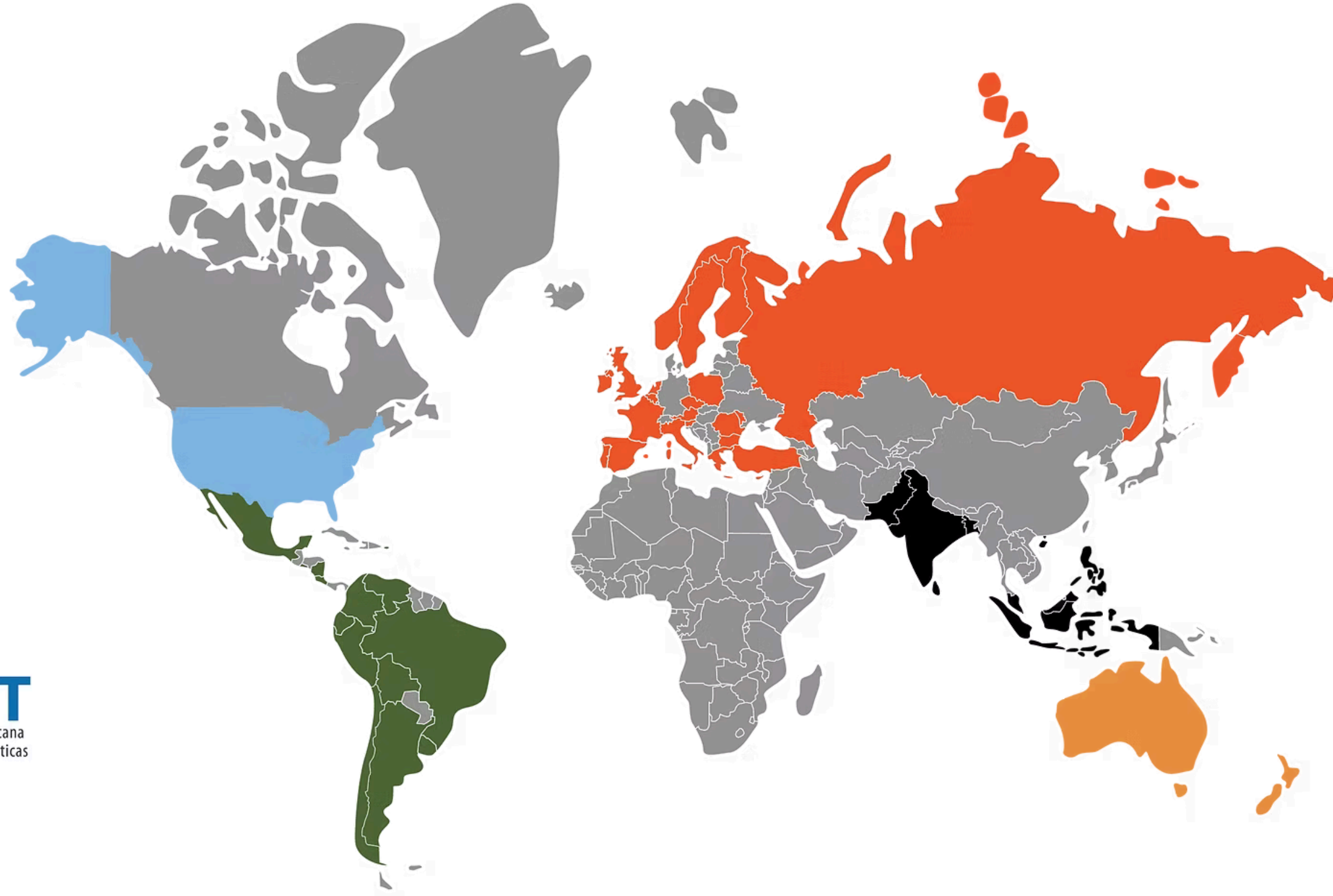


Dr. Sushma Taylor
President



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Regional Federations



Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Synthetic drugs are different from traditional drugs in that they are often chemically altered to enhance potency, evade legal restrictions, and create unpredictable and dangerous effects.



The fast-evolving nature of synthetic drug production means they can be difficult to control, leading to an increased risk of overdose, mental health issues, and long-term harm.



These drugs are typically more potent, less regulated, and have a higher risk of severe health consequences compared to traditional drugs.



Synthetic drugs, due to their potent and unpredictable nature, often present more severe mental and physical health challenges than traditional drugs.





Most Common Synthetic Drugs



Synthetic Cannabinoids (e.g., K2, Spice)

Description: Synthetic cannabinoids are a class of chemicals that mimic the effects of THC, the psychoactive compound in marijuana. These drugs are often sprayed on plant material and sold as herbal incense or potpourri, labeled as "not for human consumption" to evade regulation.

Prevalence:

Synthetic cannabinoids have been widely abused, especially among young people. According to the 2019 National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) survey, about 1% of high school seniors reported using synthetic cannabinoids in the past month.

Synthetic Cathinones (e.g., Bath Salts)

Description: Synthetic cathinones are a group of drugs that are chemically similar to amphetamines. They are often sold as "bath salts" and marketed as stimulants. These substances can cause intense euphoria but are also associated with extreme agitation, aggression, and hallucinations.

Prevalence:

Synthetic cathinones have become a growing concern in the U.S., especially in the past decade. According to the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), nearly 1% of people aged 18-25 reported using synthetic cathinones in the past year.

Fentanyl and Fentanyl Analogues

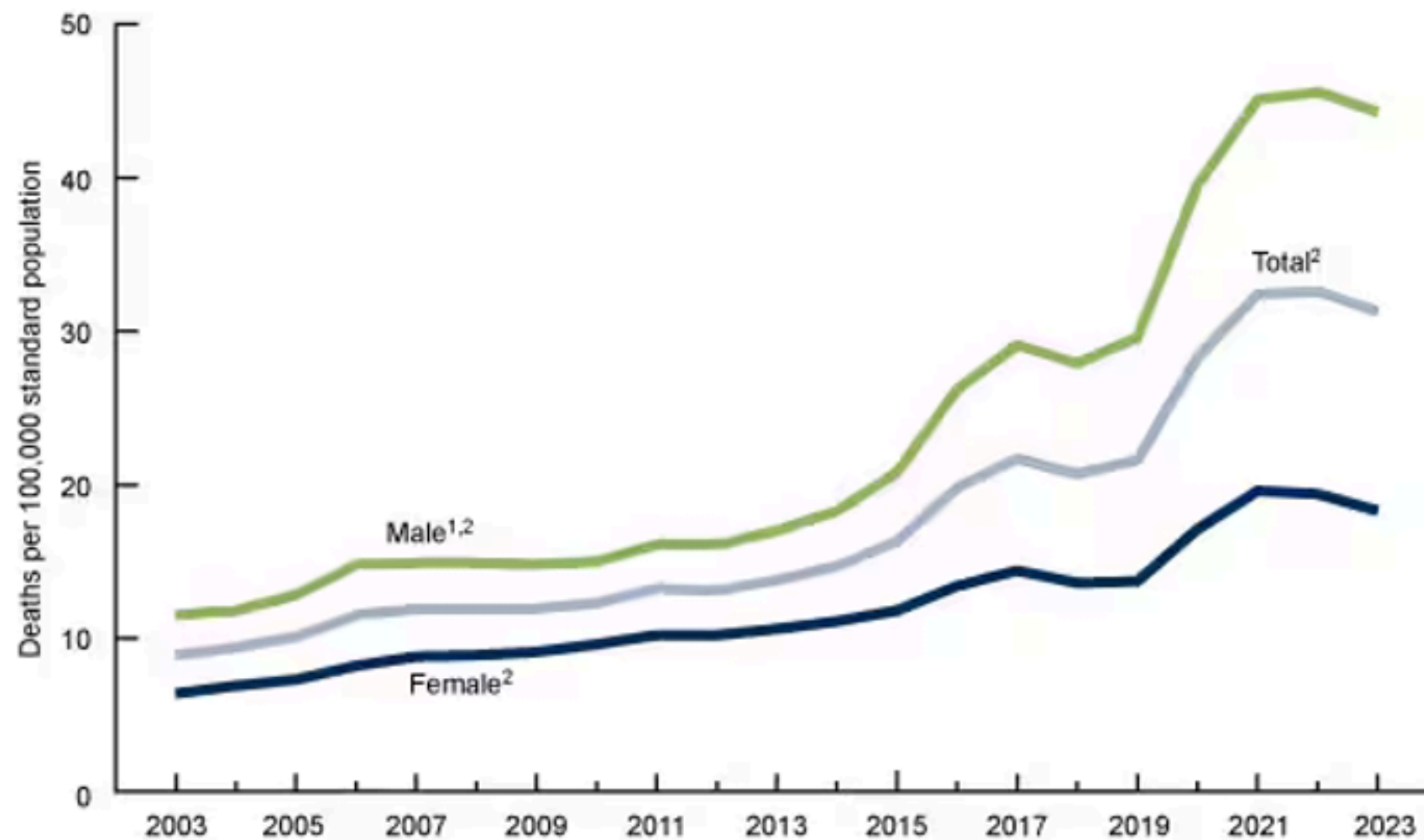
Description: Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that is up to 100 times more potent than morphine. While it is prescribed for severe pain management, much of the fentanyl circulating in the U.S. is illicitly manufactured and mixed with other drugs like heroin, cocaine, or counterfeit prescription pills.

Prevalence:

Fentanyl is now the leading cause of drug overdose deaths in the U.S. In 2022, it was involved in about 71,000 overdose deaths, representing roughly 70% of all opioid-related deaths in the country.

More than 70,000 Americans a year die from overdoses of fentanyl

- Age-adjusted drug overdose death rate, by sex: United States, 2003–2023



- The age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths increased from 8.9 deaths per 100,000 standard population in 2003 to 32.6 in 2022; however, the rate decreased to 31.3 in 2023.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db522.htm>

For the first time since 2018, the United States has seen a decrease in drug overdose deaths and poisonings, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noting a **14.5 percent decrease** in deaths between June 2023 and June 2024. **But why?**



Life Saving Tool

Increased access and availability of free naloxone, a medicine that can reverse an opioid.



Less Potent or Available Fentanyl

Shortages and price rises; drop in purity as fentanyl is cut with more and different adulterants.



Vulnerable Population is Shrinking?

So many have died that they have not been replaced at the same rate by new users.



What's Next?

Nitazenes, another synthetic opioid that can be stronger than fentanyl, has appeared in Europe and the US Midwest.

While **fentanyl use is a growing concern in both the U.S. and Europe**, it remains a **more severe and widespread crisis in the United States**, with significantly higher overdose death rates and a larger illicit market. In Europe, fentanyl-related deaths are rising but still constitute a smaller share of total drug-related deaths. As the global drug trade continues to evolve, there are concerns that fentanyl's impact could increase across both regions.

1 Scale of the Crisis:

1. **The U.S.** fentanyl crisis is far more widespread and severe, with fentanyl-related deaths accounting for the majority of the opioid overdose crisis in the country.
2. In contrast, while fentanyl use is increasing **in Europe**, it is not yet the dominant cause of overdose deaths.

2 Routes of Distribution:

1. **In the U.S.**, fentanyl is largely trafficked from Mexico, with significant quantities being found in illicitly manufactured pills and other drugs.
2. **In Europe**, fentanyl is often sourced from Eastern Europe, China, and other international markets. Prescription fentanyl remains more prevalent in the medical field.

3 Public Health Response:

1. **The U.S.** has focused heavily on measures to combat the fentanyl crisis, such as increasing access to naloxone (an opioid overdose reversal drug) and implementing harm reduction strategies.
2. **Europe** has a more controlled response, with some countries actively expanding the availability of harm reduction services, including supervised injection rooms and naloxone distribution.

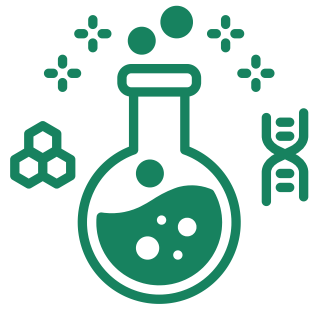
4 Use Among Demographics:

1. **In the U.S.**, fentanyl has increasingly been found mixed with other illicit drugs, putting even those not seeking opioids at risk of overdose.
2. **In Europe**, fentanyl use remains largely confined to opioid-dependent populations, although that could change as fentanyl trafficking increases.

Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

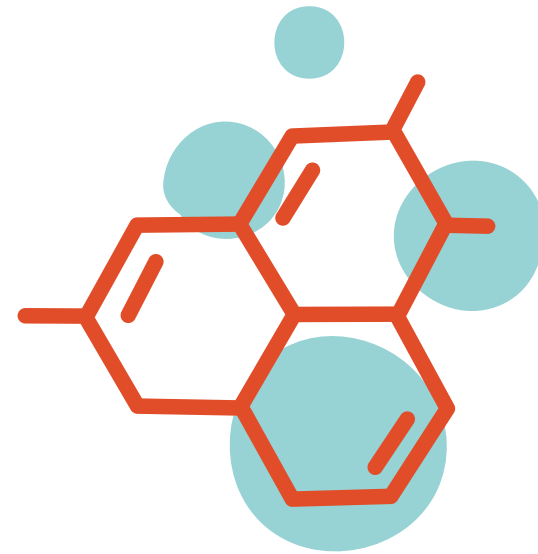
Synthetic drugs are different from traditional (or natural) drugs in several key ways, including their composition, effects on the body, and potential for harm. Here's a breakdown of why synthetic drugs stand apart from traditional drugs:

Chemical Composition



Synthetic Drugs:

These are man-made substances, often created in laboratories to mimic or alter the effects of naturally occurring drugs. They may be chemically similar to traditional drugs but are often altered to make them more potent, longer-lasting, or cheaper to produce. Examples include synthetic cannabinoids (like K2 or Spice) or synthetic cathinones (commonly known as bath salts).



Traditional Drugs:

Traditional drugs, like marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and prescription medications, come from natural sources (plants, opiates from poppies) or are developed using established pharmacological methods. They have been studied extensively, and their effects are generally predictable when used in appropriate doses.

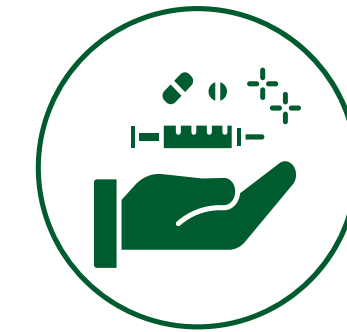
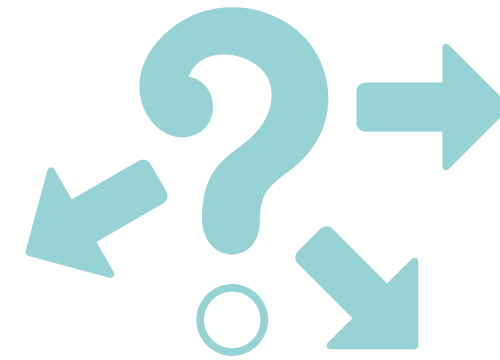
Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Unpredictable Effects



Synthetic Drugs:

Since synthetic drugs are often chemically altered in ways that are not always understood, their effects can be highly unpredictable. For example, synthetic cannabinoids can cause extreme agitation, paranoia, hallucinations, and even violent behavior, and their potency can vary significantly between batches. People using synthetic drugs may not know exactly what they are ingesting, making overdose or severe reactions more likely.



Traditional Drugs:

While traditional drugs can also have strong effects, they tend to be more predictable, especially when used under medical supervision or in known doses. Cocaine, for instance, has well-established effects on the brain and body, though still dangerous, and heroin use follows a more consistent pattern of effects than synthetic opioids.

Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Potency and Dosage



Synthetic Drugs:

These substances are often more potent than their traditional counterparts, sometimes due to their chemical alterations. A small amount of a synthetic drug can have a much stronger effect than expected, increasing the risk of overdose or severe side effects. For instance, synthetic opioids like fentanyl are thousands of times more potent than heroin, which greatly increases the risk of accidental overdose.



Traditional Drugs:

While traditional drugs like heroin, cocaine, and marijuana have a range of effects, their potency is generally more consistent and well-known. Dosages for substances like prescription opioids are often carefully controlled, reducing the risk of accidental overdose compared to synthetic drugs.

Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Lack of Regulation and Quality Control



Synthetic Drugs:

Many synthetic drugs are produced in unregulated environments, often overseas, and sold with no oversight. This lack of quality control means that these drugs can vary greatly in purity and potency, and sometimes may be mixed with other dangerous substances, increasing the risk of harmful reactions.



Traditional Drugs:

While illegal drugs like heroin or cocaine are also unregulated, they are often produced in more consistent quantities, especially if sold on the black market by established dealers. Prescription drugs, on the other hand, are highly regulated and standardized, ensuring that users receive specific doses and purity.

Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Legal Status and Availability



Synthetic Drugs:

Synthetic drugs are often designed to skirt the law by modifying chemical structures to evade drug bans. For example, a specific synthetic cannabinoid might be legal in some countries because it differs slightly in chemical structure from banned substances. As new versions of synthetic drugs are created, they can quickly spread in popularity because they remain legal until authorities catch up.



Traditional Drugs:

Traditional drugs like marijuana, cocaine, or heroin have well-established legal statuses, though they are still illegal in many places (except for marijuana in some regions). Their legality tends to be more stable, and as a result, they are generally subject to more consistent regulation and law enforcement.

Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Health Risks and Long-Term Effects



Synthetic Drugs:

Synthetic drugs are associated with a range of dangerous health effects, many of which are poorly understood due to the rapid creation of new substances and the limited research available. Some synthetic cannabinoids, for example, can cause seizures, organ damage, and mental health issues like psychosis. Synthetic cathinones can cause severe agitation, increased heart rate, and even death.



Traditional Drugs:

While traditional drugs also come with significant risks—such as overdose, dependence, and long-term health effects—they are generally more understood in terms of their impact on the body. Research on drugs like heroin or cocaine has provided a better understanding of their long-term effects and the risks involved.

Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Addiction and Withdrawal



Synthetic Drugs:

Many synthetic drugs are highly addictive, and withdrawal symptoms can be severe, though less is known about them compared to traditional drugs. Because these drugs often have stronger and more unpredictable effects, they can create intense psychological dependence, and withdrawal can involve dangerous symptoms.



Traditional Drugs:

Traditional drugs like heroin, alcohol, and nicotine are known to cause both physical and psychological dependence. The withdrawal symptoms from these substances are more understood, and while they can be debilitating and dangerous, they tend to follow more predictable patterns compared to the withdrawal from synthetic drugs.

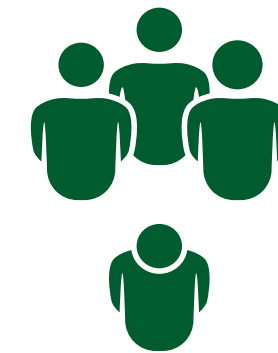
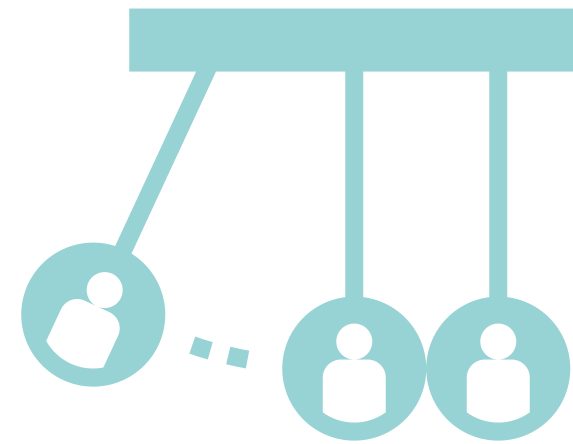
Synthetic Drugs vs Traditional Drugs

Public Perception and Social Impact



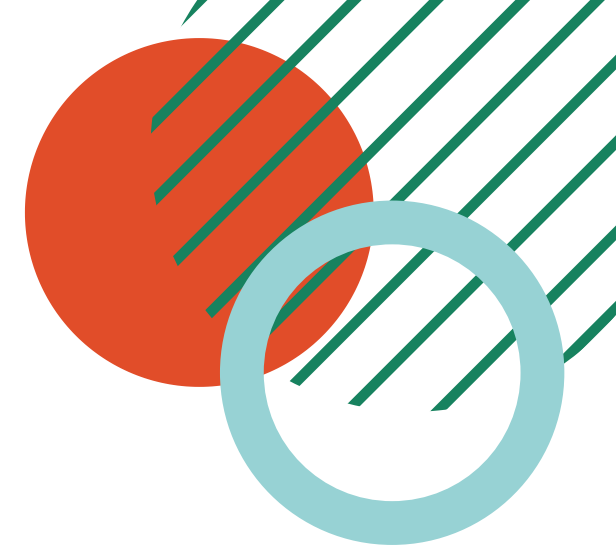
Synthetic Drugs:

The use of synthetic drugs is often associated with higher levels of risk-taking behavior, unpredictability, and criminal activity due to their legal status and lack of regulation. They tend to be seen as more dangerous and are often linked to more severe public health issues.



Traditional Drugs:

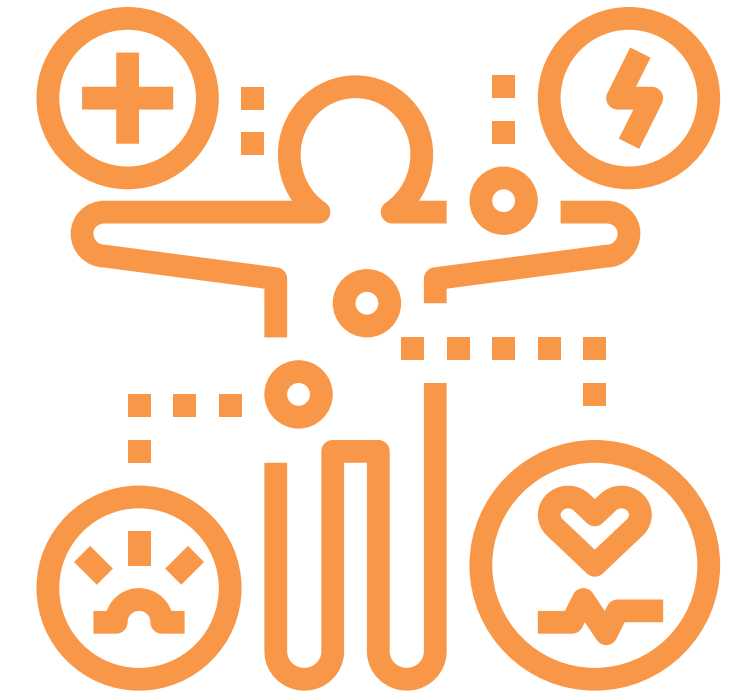
Traditional drugs, particularly prescription medications, may be seen in a more normalized light, especially when used under medical supervision. However, illicit use of traditional drugs like cocaine or heroin still carries significant stigma, though the perception tends to be less alarming than that of synthetic drugs.



How Therapeutic Communities Can Help Treat Synthetic Drug Use



Therapeutic Communities offer a holistic, long-term, and community-based approach that is often more suited to the complex needs of synthetic drug users. The combination of emotional, social, and psychological support, along with an emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reflection, makes TCs particularly effective in addressing the multifaceted nature of synthetic drug addiction.



In contrast, other drug treatment methods, while effective for many individuals, often focus on symptom control, detoxification, or short-term relief. They may not provide the same level of ongoing support, community engagement, and holistic treatment that can lead to long-term recovery, especially for synthetic drug users who face more severe mental health consequences and behavioral challenges.



Treatment in Therapeutic Communities (TCs) can be an effective approach to helping individuals who are struggling with synthetic drug use. TCs are structured, drug-free environments where individuals work together to address the psychological, behavioral, and social issues associated with substance use. Here's how treatment in TCs can assist with synthetic drug use:



1. Community Support: TCs are built on the principle that peer support can be transformative. Individuals who are dealing with synthetic drug use can benefit from being surrounded by others who understand their struggles. The sense of community provides accountability, motivation, and the opportunity to share experiences and recovery strategies.



2. Holistic Treatment: TCs typically offer a holistic approach, addressing not just the addiction but also the underlying causes such as mental health issues, trauma, or past abuse. This is important for individuals who have become addicted to synthetic drugs, as these substances can often be a coping mechanism for other issues.



3. Therapeutic Environment: The environment in TCs is designed to promote personal growth and self-awareness. This helps individuals reflect on their behaviors and motivations, teaching them healthier coping mechanisms and ways to rebuild their lives. The structured environment also reduces exposure to triggers or people that might encourage drug use.



4. Skill Development: TCs provide various programs that focus on building life skills, emotional regulation, and relapse prevention. Learning these skills is essential for those recovering from synthetic drug addiction, as it can help them resist future temptations and manage stress without relying on substances.



5. Long-Term Treatment: Synthetic drug addiction often requires a long-term treatment plan due to the complex nature of the drugs and their impact on the brain. TCs typically offer extended treatment durations, which can be crucial for ensuring that the individual not only detoxifies but also recovers in a sustained way.



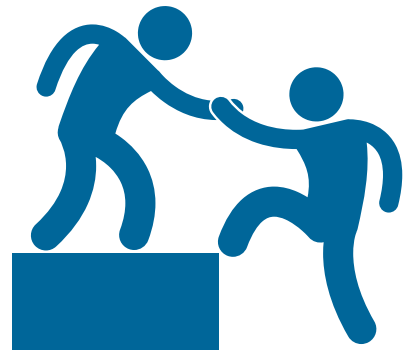
6. Focus on Responsibility and Self-Reflection: One of the core principles of a Therapeutic Community is taking responsibility for one's actions. This can be a powerful tool for people struggling with synthetic drugs, as they are encouraged to reflect on their drug use, its impact, and how they can take responsibility for their recovery.



7. Relapse Prevention: Because synthetic drugs can be highly addictive and difficult to stop using, TCs offer specialized support for relapse prevention. The structured and supportive environment helps individuals manage cravings, recognize warning signs of relapse, and maintain their recovery after treatment.

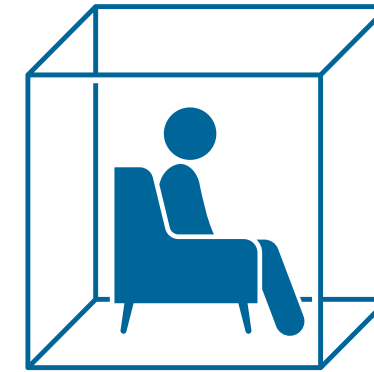
In short, the supportive, community-driven, and therapeutic nature of Therapeutic Communities can help individuals struggling with synthetic drug use by offering them **structure, emotional support, skill-building, and tools** to address both their addiction and any underlying issues.

Community Support vs. Individual Treatment



Therapeutic Communities:

One of the core principles of TCs is peer support and shared experiences. Synthetic drug users, often dealing with complex and intense psychological effects, can benefit from the sense of belonging and accountability that TCs provide. The community setting helps individuals rebuild trust, learn healthy interpersonal skills, and receive emotional support from others who are in recovery.



Other Methods:

While some outpatient or inpatient rehab programs may offer group therapy, the level of peer engagement in a TC is often more intense and consistent. Individual therapy methods like CBT or motivational interviewing (MI) often work on a one-on-one basis with a therapist and may lack the strong community and peer interaction that can be so vital in recovery from synthetic drug use.

Long-Term Focus vs. Short-Term Solutions



Therapeutic Communities:

TCs tend to focus on long-term recovery, which is crucial for synthetic drug users who often face prolonged withdrawal symptoms and mental health recovery challenges. The environment is structured to help individuals work through their addiction in stages, offering extended support as they reintegrate into society.



Other Methods:

Some traditional treatment methods, like inpatient detoxification or short-term residential programs, focus on acute care (e.g., managing withdrawal symptoms) and may not provide the extended support needed for long-term recovery. These programs can be effective in addressing the initial phases of addiction but may not offer the sustained emotional and social support required for synthetic drug users who face more complex recovery journeys.

Self-Reflection and Responsibility vs. Symptom Management



Therapeutic Communities:

A central element of TC treatment is the emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reflection. Synthetic drug users are encouraged to examine their past behaviors, take responsibility for their actions, and engage in regular self-assessment. This process helps individuals regain a sense of control over their lives and promotes long-term behavior change.



Other Methods:

Traditional treatments often focus more on symptom management (e.g., dealing with cravings, detoxing, or replacing the drug with a less harmful substance like methadone). While these are essential aspects of treatment, they may not emphasize the same level of introspection or personal responsibility, which can be a key part of sustained recovery.

Emotional and Social Reintegration vs. Physical Detoxification



Therapeutic Communities:

TCs provide an immersive environment that encourages emotional and social reintegration. For synthetic drug users, who may have isolated themselves due to the intense effects of their addiction, this community setting helps them rebuild trust, learn social skills, and engage in pro-social behavior. The relationships formed in a TC are often an essential part of maintaining sobriety after treatment.



Other Methods:

While other treatment methods may provide some level of emotional or social support, they often focus more on the physical aspects of addiction (e.g., withdrawal management, physical detox) and less on long-term social reintegration. For synthetic drug users, emotional healing and social connections are crucial, as these drugs often leave deep psychological scars.

Relapse Prevention vs. Symptom Control



Therapeutic Communities:

TCs teach relapse prevention as a core component of their treatment. Individuals in TCs are actively involved in learning coping strategies, problem-solving, and dealing with high-risk situations. The community aspect of the treatment ensures that individuals are held accountable and supported throughout their recovery.



Other Methods:

Traditional methods like MAT (Medication-Assisted Treatment) or outpatient therapy can be effective for relapse prevention, particularly for opioid addiction, but they may rely more on external tools like medication or counseling. TCs, however, offer a more integrated, social model of relapse prevention, where individuals learn how to navigate challenges without relying on substances.

Resilience and Coping Mechanisms vs. Medication



Therapeutic Communities:

In a TC, individuals build resilience through group activities, therapy, and skill-building exercises that focus on handling stress, triggers, and life challenges without returning to drugs. This is especially beneficial for synthetic drug users, as these substances often exacerbate mental health issues and trigger episodes of intense psychological distress.



Other Methods:

Medication-based treatments, such as the use of antipsychotic medications or benzodiazepines, may be used for managing symptoms associated with synthetic drug withdrawal or mental health concerns. While these can help with the immediate effects, they do not necessarily teach long-term coping skills.



THANK YOU