

Addressing Fear of Negative Consequences of Overdose Response

Background:

The opioid crisis presents a significant and widespread challenge in the U.S., with over 100,000 people dying from drug overdoses in 2021. Fentanyl is being mixed into illegal drugs like cocaine and counterfeit pills, making overdoses more common. Naloxone, a medicine that can reverse an overdose, is available without a prescription with primarily first responders, clinicians and people who use drugs trained to use it.

However, overdoses are happening more often in public places like restaurants and bars, where workers are the first to witness an event. Little research has been done on how service industry workers feel about witnessing overdoses or their role in helping. This study looks at the experiences of these workers to improve overdose training.

Key Takeaway:

Fear of injury, disease transmission, and fentanyl exposure significantly hinders service industry workers from responding to opioid overdoses, highlighting the need for targeted education and harm reduction measures. There are many misconceptions, especially around fentanyl exposure, that contribute to this fear. Training programs must focus on myth-busting to address these misunderstandings and build confidence in responding to overdoses safely.

Methods:

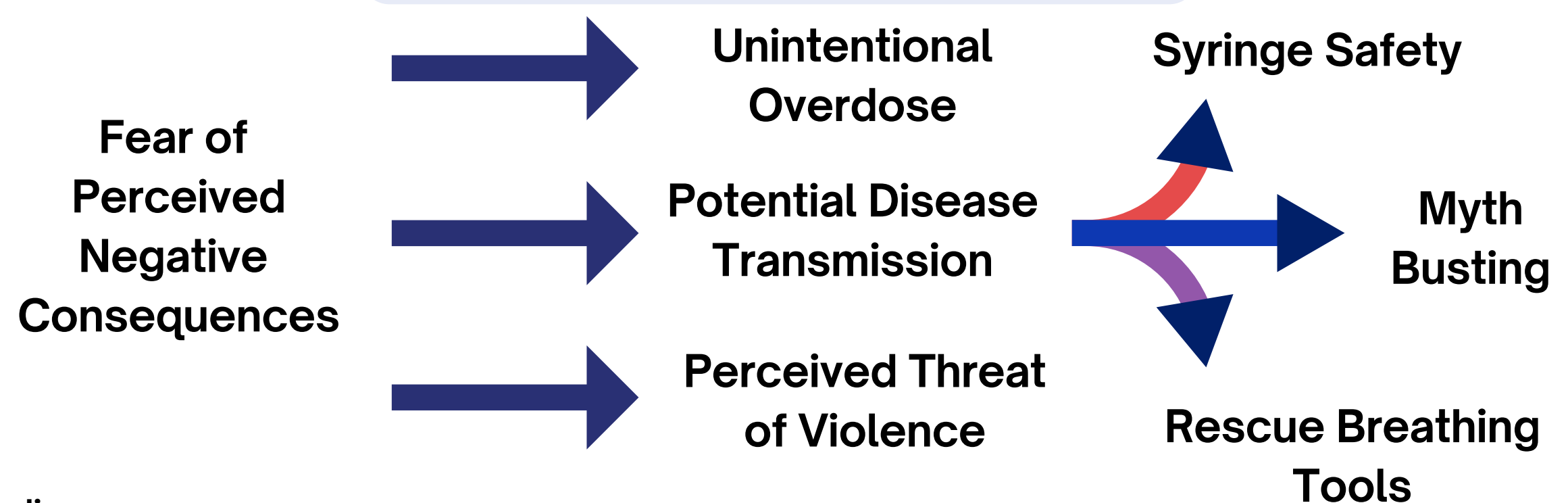
Data Collection:

- 15 service industry workers, who had encountered an overdose at work, were interviewed in 1 Atlanta neighborhood.
- Participants were recruited through a combination of direct questions and recommendations from other participants (snowball sampling).
- The lead researcher collected cultural and social relationship contextualization through observations of participants at a syringe exchange program in the area.
- Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, focusing on participants' most memorable overdose experiences at work.

Analysis:

- Thematic data analysis was used, where interview and observation notes were reviewed and analyzed for common themes related to overdose experiences.
- Two independent researchers reviewed the transcripts, analyzing the data iteratively to identify key themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews and observations.
- 14 of the 15 participants had knowledge of drug and opioid use through friends, family or work exposures

Themes and Implications



Findings:

- Many participants feared the negative consequences of responding to an overdose, such as the risk of disease transmission (e.g., from syringes) and violence from individuals using drugs. These fears were significant barriers to helping during overdose incidents.
- While most participants were willing to perform rescue breathing in an overdose situation, a few expressed reluctance, citing fear of disease transmission or seeing individuals who use drugs as unworthy of help.
- Participants were concerned about accidental exposure to drugs, especially fentanyl, while assisting in overdose situations. This fear, along with the belief that drug users could become violent, added to their hesitations in responding to overdoses.

Discussion:

Service industry workers often fear harm when responding to opioid overdoses, such as needlestick injuries or fentanyl exposure, though these risks are frequently overstated. These fears create barriers to overdose response, but many can be effectively addressed during Opioid Education and Naloxone Distribution (OEND) training. By providing accurate information and practical tools—like syringe disposal boxes and barrier devices for rescue breathing—we hope to encourage more people to help. Addressing these concerns directly not only improves response rates but also helps reduce the stigma surrounding opioid overdoses, which is a known barrier to effective intervention.

Citation:

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