

Benzodiazepines – A Prescription for Dependency and the Fight for Change

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Benzodiazepines, commonly prescribed for anxiety and insomnia, pose significant risks of dependency and severe withdrawal symptoms, as documented in the film "As Prescribed" through personal testimonies
- › The "Benzo Bill" legislative initiative would implement stricter prescribing guidelines and mandatory informed consent, though it faces resistance from some medical professionals and industry
- › The medical community remains divided on benzodiazepine safety, with pharmaceutical influence complicating the debate and undermining patient welfare through aggressive marketing practices
- › Support systems like online groups and the Ashton Manual provide resources for those dependent on benzodiazepines, helping them navigate withdrawal and recovery
- › Alternative anxiety management approaches include natural solutions like EFT tapping and GABA supplements, along with lifestyle factors like proper sleep, physical activity and sunlight exposure

In conventional mental health treatment, benzodiazepines have long been a staple for managing anxiety, insomnia and various other conditions. Medications such as Xanax, Ativan and Klonopin are prescribed to millions, offering temporary relief to those grappling with overwhelming stress and panic.

However, as illuminated in film "As Prescribed," the widespread use of benzodiazepines carries significant risks of dependency, severe withdrawal symptoms and profound impacts on individuals and their families.¹ The documentary explores the human cost of benzodiazepine dependence, the legislative battles to regulate their prescription, the divided stance within the medical community and the support systems emerging to help those affected.

Personal Narratives – The Human Cost of Benzodiazepine Dependence

The heart of "As Prescribed" lies in the raw, unfiltered testimonies of individuals and families torn apart by benzodiazepine dependency. Geraldine Burns' story serves as a poignant example. Initially prescribed Ativan postpartum, Geraldine quickly found herself trapped in a cycle of tolerance and withdrawal.

Her narrative underscores the silent struggle many face – believing they're taking medication as directed, only to discover debilitating side effects that erode their quality of life. "I have to go through this every day, a re-taping of this," Geraldine expresses, highlighting the relentless nature of benzodiazepine withdrawal.²

Scott Peterson's journey further exemplifies the devastating physical and mental toll of these medications. From being a weightlifter at 205 pounds to losing significant weight and becoming bedridden, Peterson's transformation reveals the devastating impact benzodiazepines have on your body and psyche. His agoraphobia and inability to engage in activities he once loved paint a stark picture of the isolation and despair that accompany dependency.

Amy, Peterson's partner, embodies the challenges faced by caregivers. Balancing her well-being while supporting Peterson through his dependence and recovery illustrates the often-overlooked burden borne by family members. Other personal experiences add layers to this narrative, showcasing the intersection of benzodiazepine withdrawal with other life struggles, such as battling cancer or striving to regain normalcy through activities like climbing.

These personal stories are not isolated incidents but part of a broader tapestry of lives disrupted by benzodiazepine misuse. They serve as a clarion call for greater awareness and systemic change in how these medications are prescribed and managed.

The Legislative Battle – Crafting the Benzodiazepine Bill

Amidst the personal tragedies, "As Prescribed" also chronicles the fervent advocacy efforts to address benzodiazepine misuse through legislative action. Burns and her son Garrett emerge as pivotal figures in this fight, spearheading the creation of the "Benzo Bill." Their motivation is clear: to curb the overprescription and dependency associated with these drugs by implementing stricter guidelines and informed consent requirements.

The bill's key provisions ensure that benzodiazepines are prescribed responsibly, with an emphasis on short-term use and thorough patient education about risks. Informed consent becomes a cornerstone, mandating that patients are fully aware of the dangers of long-term use and dependency before being prescribed these medications.³

Committee hearings reveal the contentious nature of this legislative effort. Testimonies from affected individuals like Burns and Peterson provide compelling evidence of the bill's necessity. However, opposition from certain medical professionals and organizations, such as the Massachusetts Medical Society, underscores the resistance to change within the medical establishment.⁴

These opponents argue that benzodiazepines are safe when used correctly and fear that the bill may restrict access for those who genuinely need these medications. Despite these challenges, the bill garners significant support from benzodiazepine survivors and their advocates. The emotional and factual weight of their testimonies plays a key role in pushing the bill forward.

Medical Community and Pharmaceutical Influence

The debate surrounding benzodiazepines is further complicated by the divided opinions within the medical community and the pervasive influence of pharmaceutical companies. On one side, psychiatrists like Dr. Carl Salzman and Dr. Ed Silberman defend benzodiazepines, citing their safety and efficacy when prescribed appropriately.

They argue that these medications are among the safest available for managing anxiety and other conditions, claiming that misuse and overprescription are the real culprits behind dependency issues. But advocates and survivors like Burns challenge this perspective, pointing to the lack of oversight and the systemic failures in prescribing practices.

They highlight the absence of standardized tapering protocols and the insufficient training doctors receive regarding benzodiazepine dependency and withdrawal. This divide is further exacerbated by the influence of pharmaceutical companies, which often shape medical guidelines and prescribing habits through funding and research support, leading to conflicts of interest.

Further, pharmaceutical companies' interests undermine patient welfare, with medical professionals often prioritizing drug efficacy and sales over long-term patient health. This tension between pharmaceutical interests and patient advocacy creates significant obstacles in reforming benzodiazepine prescribing practices, making legislative and policy changes all the more essential.⁵

Support Systems and Resources for Benzodiazepine Users

In response to the pervasive issue of benzodiazepine dependency, support systems and resources have emerged to help those affected. Online support groups, like the one Burns started, provide a platform for individuals to share their experiences, offer mutual support and disseminate valuable information on managing withdrawal and recovery.

These communities play an important role in fostering a sense of solidarity among survivors, helping them navigate the complex and often isolating journey of overcoming

dependency. The Ashton Manual, another key resource mentioned in the film, offers comprehensive guidelines for safely tapering off benzodiazepines.

Developed by Professor Heather Ashton, the manual is widely regarded as an essential tool for both patients and health care providers, emphasizing gradual reduction in dosage to mitigate withdrawal symptoms.

Its dissemination has been instrumental in educating patients and doctors about the realities of benzodiazepine withdrawal and the importance of controlled tapering processes. World Benzodiazepine Awareness Day, celebrated on July 11 every year, further represents the global effort to raise awareness about the dangers of long-term benzodiazepine use.

Through activities like distributing flyers, hosting seminars and leveraging social media, advocates help educate the public, influence policy and reduce the stigma surrounding benzodiazepine dependency. These awareness campaigns are shifting public perception and fostering a more informed and supportive environment for those affected.

Challenges in Withdrawal and Recovery

The process of withdrawing from benzodiazepines is fraught with challenges, as illustrated by the testimonies in "As Prescribed."⁶ Withdrawal symptoms range from severe physical discomforts like headaches, muscle twitching and balance issues to intense psychological distress, including anxiety, depression and hallucinations.

These symptoms often compel individuals to seek medical help, only to find themselves trapped in a cycle of dependency as doctors typically don't provide adequate support or appropriate tapering strategies. Barriers to effective treatment are multifaceted. Medical barriers include the lack of standardized protocols for benzodiazepine tapering and the inadequate training of health care providers in managing dependency.

Financial and social barriers, such as the high cost of treatment, stigma associated with dependency and the lack of robust support networks, further complicate the recovery

process. Individuals often find themselves navigating a convoluted health care system without sufficient guidance or resources, worsening their struggles.⁷

Despite these obstacles, success stories offer a glimmer of hope. Individuals like Burns demonstrate resilience and determination in reclaiming their lives from benzodiazepine dependency. Through a combination of support groups, resources like The Ashton Manual and personal tenacity, many are able to manage their withdrawal symptoms and gradually rebuild their lives.

However, the path to recovery remains arduous, with many still facing setbacks and ongoing challenges in their journey toward healing.

The Broader Context of Benzodiazepines Versus Opiates

The issues surrounding [benzodiazepine dependency](#) bear striking similarities to the opiate crisis, offering valuable lessons for addressing prescription drug misuse more broadly. Both classes of drugs have been widely prescribed for certain medical reasons, only to become sources of significant public health crises due to overprescription, misuse and dependency.

The legislative and public health responses to the [opiate crisis](#), which include stricter prescribing guidelines, increased public awareness and enhanced support systems, offer strategies for tackling benzodiazepine misuse. Legislation like the Benzo Bill draws inspiration from opiate regulations to implement informed consent, restrict long-term prescriptions and ensure that patients are fully aware of the risks associated with benzodiazepine use.

Furthermore, the global nature of prescription drug misuse highlights the need for international collaboration and standardized practices. Just as the opiate crisis has prompted worldwide efforts to regulate and monitor drug prescriptions, benzodiazepine misuse requires a coordinated response that goes beyond national boundaries, ensuring that best practices are shared and implemented universally to protect patient health and well-being.

Hope on the Horizon – Rebuilding Lives and Shaping Policies

Despite the daunting challenges posed by benzodiazepine dependency, the stories of recovery and resilience offer a hopeful outlook. Individuals like Peterson and Amy demonstrate that, with the right support systems and resources, it's possible to regain control over your life and rebuild relationships and personal well-being.

Their journeys highlight the power of community support, informed resources and persistent advocacy in overcoming the grips of dependency. If you're struggling with anxiety, the [Emotional Freedom Techniques](#) (EFT) is a practical tool for fast relief from anxiety symptoms. EFT is based on the same energy meridians used in acupuncture. However, instead of stimulating the pathways with needles, EFT uses tapping with your fingertips along with voicing positive affirmations.

If you're looking for another natural option for anxiety and stress relief, gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA), widely available in supplement and tea forms, should be on your radar. GABA is a powerful neurotransmitter that inhibits excessive neuronal firing, helping to induce a natural state of calm in animal studies,⁸ while also reducing depression-related behavior.⁹

Low levels of GABA, or impaired GABA functioning, is associated with multiple mental health conditions, including chronic stress, anxiety disorders and sleep disturbances like insomnia.¹⁰ Regular sun exposure, physical activity and adequate sleep are also essential to support optimal mental health.

As advocacy groups continue to push for change and survivors share their stories, the collective momentum builds toward a future where benzodiazepines are prescribed only with extreme caution, dependency is prevented and those affected by misuse receive the support and care they need.

The ongoing efforts to raise awareness, influence policy and provide robust support systems are instrumental in shaping a health care environment that prioritizes patient safety, informed consent and compassionate care.

Sources and References

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- [8, 9 Translational Psychiatry, Volume 12, Article number: 227 \(2022\), Discussion](#)
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