



August is normally summer's last hurrah, but it is also a time for new beginnings. Consider freshman orientation, high school football practice, and band camp, just to name a few. Add to that list this new monthly column addressing all things related to substance abuse and addiction, yet another example of The Home News Tribune's support of educating the public about addiction, recovery, treatment and prevention of substance abuse.

As you have surely noticed, every topic or cause has its own dedicated day, week, or month on the calendar. The field of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse is no exception. In fact, August is the newest dedicated month in the form of *National Medication Abuse Awareness Month*.

This campaign is fresh, timely, and filled with a sense of urgency. While other substances of abuse such as heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, tobacco and even alcohol have quietly been on a steady decline for the last five to ten years, one class of drugs has seemingly come out of nowhere to capture the lives of youth and adults across the country. I am talking about pharmaceuticals; both over the counter and prescription medications used "recreationally" and abusively.

Today, for first time, we see more new recreational users of pharmaceuticals than marijuana. Imagine ... Percocet, Valium, and Xanax are the new gateway drugs. Exaggeration? Not when you consider that one in ten twelfth graders across the country reported using Percocet to get high last year.

How did this happen? Just look at all of the spam emails inviting us to try Oxycontin without a prescription or the TV commercials asking us to talk to our doctors about (insert today's drug du jour here). To quote the Partnership for a Drug Free New Jersey in their latest campaign, "Who knew Grandma kept a stash?"

I'm not here to merely sound an alarm. I am here to let you know that there are a few very concrete steps we can take to do our part to reduce this trend. First, become aware. Second, go to your medicine cabinets and clean out the stash. Once you start looking, you may be quite surprised by what you have accumulated.

If your pharmacy does not yet offer a safe disposal program for your unused medicines, Federal Guidelines suggest taking them out of their original containers and throwing them in the trash – I particularly like their suggestion of mixing the pills with the used coffee grinds! To avoid contaminating the water supply, **do not** flush medicines down the toilet unless specifically instructed to do so. Going forward, keep your medications in a secure place where they cannot be accessed by a child, inquisitive teen or nosy houseguest.

Medication abuse is an issue we can address, and it won't take us the whole month of August to do our part. Liz Phair brought "Mother's Little Helper" to a whole new generation of Desperate Housewives in 2005. Let's ensure that her version does not have the staying power of the Rolling Stones'.

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