

THE SPACE BETWEEN EUPHORIA AND OVERDOSE

Understanding opioid use beyond the pleasure vs. harm divide

PURPOSE

Most conversations about opioids focus on overdose and risk. This study explored how people who use opioids experience getting high, overdosing, and "coming to" afterward.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Researchers interviewed people who use opioids in Kitchener and Galt, Ontario about their experiences with:

- Getting high
- Overdose
- "Coming to" after overdose
- Navigating risk, pleasure, and everyday life

KEY FINDINGS

Pleasure and Harm Are Not Opposites

Some participants described aspects of overdose, such as nodding off or drifting in and out of consciousness, as pleasurable or desirable.

Searching for the "Ideal High"

Participants often described balancing:

- Pleasure
- Safety
- Predictability

The "ideal high" was a moving target and people described searching for a balance.

Context Matters

Experiences were shaped by:

- 🏠 Housing instability
- 👥 Social relationships
- 📍 Where drugs were used
- ⚠️ Concerns about theft and violence

How People Wake Up Matters

Many participants preferred assisted breathing or oxygen when possible because naloxone was often described as abruptly ending the high and causing withdrawal symptoms.

Coming to with breaths

gradual waking → relief → more comfort

Coming to with naloxone

sudden awakening → withdrawal → distress

IMPLICATIONS

People's experiences with opioids do not fit neatly into categories of either "pleasure" or "harm." Instead, participants described experiences that moved between both at the same time. Understanding this complexity can help create more realistic and effective responses to substance use and overdose.

Read the full article:

G. Bardwell (online, 2026).
Rethinking the Drug Pleasure
Versus Harm Binary via Chaosmos:
On "Euphoria," "Overdose," and the
Politics of Coming To.
Contemporary Drug Problems.

