



Opioids are powerful psychotherapeutic medications *A summary of Evidence*

While opioids are almost exclusively used to treat pain in the United States, they are known to also have powerful psychotherapeutic effects. The first historical documentation of opioid use was by the Sumerian people in Mesopotamia in about 3400 BC. They called the poppy plant “Hul Gil” which means “happy plant”. They removed the latex from the seed pod and dried it to form opium powder.

Throughout history, opioids have been used for both their pain-relieving and their psychotherapeutic effects. People suffering from severe pain often have both a physical and a psychological component to that pain and opioids can effectively treat both aspects making it difficult to know if the primary benefit of the opioid is from its pain-relieving or its psychotherapeutic effects.

In the early 1900’s, morphine or opium were commonly used to treat depression. Because opioids were known to be addicting and often caused problems when used long-term, it was recommended to use this for up to 2 months to get people out of their depression and then wean them off the opioid. (Tenore, 2008)

Opioids have a powerful effect on many of the neurotransmitters of the brain. They effectively treat anxiety and depression by their blocking the reuptake of serotonin, epinephrine, and norepinephrine. They also inhibit monoamine oxidase, decrease cortisol levels, and increase binding to endorphin receptors which in turn increase dopamine. All of these effects improve depressive symptoms.

For more on this subject, please read the Tenore article.

Evidence Summary

Tenore, P. L. (2008). Psychotherapeutic benefits of opioid agonist therapy. *Journal of Addictive Diseases*, 27(3), 49–65. doi:10.1080/10550880802122646

Implications for Practice

Based on this evidence, Dr. Don Teater notes the following implications for practice:

Beware that many of the beneficial effects of opioids may be because of their psychotherapeutic effects and many patients may want to continue taking them for this reason. These beneficial effects, however, may not last and may be problematic as tolerance develops.

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For more information, visit nsc.org/rxpainkillers