

# Talking About Addiction Recovery Without Addressing Brain Injury Is Futile



**Brain Injury  
Alliance**  
ARIZONA

Just a few short years ago Southern Arizona resident, Barbara was a busy up-and-coming professional. Unfortunately, like a staggering number of Arizona residents, she also occasionally abused prescription drugs, including opioids. After using opioids recreationally one-night, Barbara woke-up in the hospital to learn her world had changed forever. While her thoughts quickly turned to worrying about her pets and home, some startling realities about her new world set in. She now has a brain injury because of the drug use. The brain damage left her with limited use of her arm, extreme light sensitivity, and a speech disorder. Unable to care for herself independently, the former professional now lives in a group home setting and wants to educate others on the dangers that opioids and substance abuse in general can pose to your brain.

Barbara is not alone in her mission. The Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona (BIAAZ) would like to see brain injury become intertwined with the topic of addiction recovery in 2018. June 5th, 2017 Governor Ducey declared a statewide health emergency to



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address the growing number of opioid overdose deaths in Arizona. One week after the declaration of a statewide health emergency Governor Ducey issued an executive order to increase reporting of the opioid-related data; to include suspected opioid overdoses and Suspected opioid deaths.

The new data points start to give us better, although still incomplete picture of just what our medical sector, first-responders, community rehabilitation professionals, and Arizona families are up against in the battle against opioid addiction. Between June and October of 2017, there were over 400 opioid deaths, and thousands more near-fatal

overdoses (like Barbara's) that may or may not have been reported. With the mass distribution of naloxone in Arizona, many of those who can reverse an overdose at home might never see the inside of hospital and might not know that their near-fatal overdose gave them a brain injury. Opiates directly impact the region of the brain that regulates breathing. During an overdose the individual may have shallow and erratic breathing, or in some cases, stop breathing altogether.

When the brain is deprived of oxygen for an extended period of time, a hypoxic or anoxic brain injury can occur. Anoxia is the complete lack of oxygen to the brain; after four minutes brain cells begin to die. Hypoxic brain injuries result from the oxygen supplied to the brain being restricted. While these are different brain injuries, mild, short-term symptoms may be dizziness or difficulty concentrating while severe cases can result in permanent damage to a person's vision, speech and memory (such as Barbara is experiencing). While Barbara's brain injury was severe enough to impact her ability to function independently, scores of Arizona residents are living with a mild brain injury caused by drug use that they are not aware of, but could be impacting their ability to function in the community. The effects of Brain injury compound a individuals ability to make a decision to enter into a recovery program, complete a recovery program and maintain their recovery long term. We must start to address Brain Injury during the recovery process to help ensure long term recovery success and to reduce the number of opioid overdose deaths in Arizona

BIAAZ is currently seeking funders and partners to allow us to deploy a state-wide education program to addiction professionals about brain injury. BIAAZ also hopes to partner with recovery centers and help them to implement brain injury screening into their intake and therapeutic processes so brain injury survivors are well-equipped to recover from addiction successfully.