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Gloria Smith's spotless kitchen has a checkered decor that matches her dress.

Knickknacks adorn the kitchen's white walls, ornamental vines are draped over the cupboards and everything is in its place — including her bottle of methadone.

Smith, 40, is a homemaker. She's also a drug addict, but she doesn't do the things many addicts do to feed their habit: rob or pilfer, prostitute themselves or deal drugs.

Methadone, which Smith has been using for three years, is a chemical manufactured to mimic many of the actions of opiates and thus to enable chronic heroin users to latch onto a cheaper, legal and less dangerous alternative. (Don't say "substitute;" the distinction is explained below.)

On a recent morning, Smith sat at her kitchen table and gazed out the window at the street she used to "work" as a heroin addict, talking of the past.

"I was tired of using dope," she said. "I was tired of lying. I was tired of having to hide."

Smith spent years doing heroin off and on. Combined with alcohol abuse, it drove her to leave a good marriage and abandon her two children. She shoplifted. She spent time in the state penitentiary for cocaine possession.

"I used to live in motels," she said. "I would be a hooker. I could con anybody. I did so many different types of scams to pay for a \$400-, \$500-, \$600-a-day habit."

One of her last recollections of those years was her emergence from a drug-induced fog to find her toddler, Cullen, playing with her bag of "rigs" (hypodermic equipment to shoot up). Smith said she had carelessly dumped the bag into the toy box used by her young son and daughter to avoid being found out by her husband at the time, who was straight.

"My children, they've forgiven me," she said, wiping her eyes. "But I know they haven't forgotten."

For three years, Smith has been taking about 55 milligrams of methadone a day. Now divorced, she has regained custody of her two children, 15 and 18, and the family has moved from a shelter to a small apartment. She has begun a business at a local flea market.

The methadone, which she drinks, is allowing her to maintain a lifestyle she once thought was closed to her forever.

"It's kept me off the heroin," she said. "It's kept me clean. It's kept me away from even wanting to think about doing the heroin."

There are four methadone clinics in San Antonio, three private and one public. The three that provided figures together serve about 1,070 former opiate addicts with a dose of methadone daily.

Research shows methadone does no damage to the brain, liver, kidneys or bones. It does not hurt unborn babies.

What it does do is provide users with a 24-hour sense of well-being -- not a high, but relief from painful withdrawal symptoms. Heroin users need a fix every few hours to maintain their equilibrium, satisfying a craving that drives them to crime and self-abuse. Methadone users take their drug in a prescribed setting every morning and spend the rest of their day free from addiction's longing.

Methadone often is seen as an addiction substitute. Some drug addicts agree, but not all.

"At first, I thought I was getting off one drug for another, except I could afford (methadone) and go to work," said Robert Perales, 42, who started using heroin when he came into contact with addicted Vietnam War veterans at age 15.

Perales, who is now a devout Christian, credits methadone with enabling him to enjoy his family for the first time.

"My life started changing, and I don't have the desire to do heroin anymore, so my attitude toward (methadone) started changing," he said. "I think it's a good thing."

Perales has been clean for about six years. He lives with his wife, Amelia, and their five-year-old daughter. Both have older children from previous marriages.

Amelia Perales has been with Robert since 1992, when he was still a heroin addict. She said the changes produced by methadone have been dramatic.

"I see the difference in him from when I first met him," she said. "My kids, they trust him with their lives."

But it wasn't always that way. Robert Perales used to be dumbfounded that Amelia's children would leave money lying around. It signified a trust that he had long been lost in his own family of 12 brothers and sisters, due to his need for heroin.

"Now, to this day, we don't trust each other for nothing," he said of his siblings. "Because once you get addicted to heroin, a heroin addict is always lying."

Perales, like many addicts, has paid a price for his drug use. He has spent time in prison for robbery. He suffers from hepatitis. His back was injured while he was working in the carpet trade, and three operations have left him disabled.

Jobless, Perales now builds birdhouses at home. He pays \$65 a month to attend the public methadone clinic run by the Center for Health Care Services, which has about 520 clients. Private methadone clinics cost about \$55 a week (^{\$220/month}).

"The methadone has allowed me to have about as normal a life as a person like me can have," said Perales, who has adjusted his 17-milligram-a-day methadone habit up to 45 milligrams to enable him to cope with his back pain.

Not every heroin user is as positive about methadone. There are those, such as Forrest Overstreet, who despise the drug.

"It's a very strong drug," he said, while testifying at a lawsuit deposition stemming from the death of a friend from rapid opiate detoxification, a new and relatively untested alternative available to heroin addicts who want to kick the habit.

For a time, he and his friend commuted to San Antonio from Kerrville to get their methadone. Overstreet complained that the drug stripped him of his ear for music, sex drive and appetite.

"I didn't like it," Overstreet said. "(My friend) didn't like it. [] []. We felt like two dogs on a 60-mile chain. San Antonio was the furthest we could go anyway, because you had to have your methadone."

"It's just a horrible drug, in my opinion, and highly addictive and extremely hard to get off of."

People who use methadone have to take a dose of it every day, usually between 50 and 100 milligrams. They go to clinics daily to receive their first doses, and provide urine samples to show they aren't still using heroin. If they prove themselves to be reliable, many clinics give them methadone to take at home.

Scientific studies about the drug have concluded that addicts who complain about various side effects from methadone -- such as weight gain, sexual dysfunction or hallucinations -- were most likely suffering these symptoms in a more extreme form when they used opiates.

All of the methadone users interviewed for this article agreed that methadone, while it quells their craving for heroin, is a tougher drug to kick.

But the tranquilizing effect of methadone can be an end in itself.

"The goal is not necessarily to get off" the drug, said Pete Fosa, executive director of the privately funded TRACs program, which serves about 100 people in San Antonio. "It's to stabilize and relearn socialization. It may take upwards of five years."

One methadone addict in San Antonio, who spoke on condition of anonymity, hedged when asked about his timetable for getting off the drug.

He recently increased his dosage from 55 milligrams a day - which he had been taking for five years - to 60 milligrams a day, due to job stress. Asked whether that boded ill for an eventual detox, he replied, "I don't want to think about that."

"I know they're talking about putting people on methadone for one year and limiting the amount of time," he said. "If a person is not ready (to get off) at that time, it's not going to work. The individual should decide."

"I mean, you've been living this lifestyle for so long, a year on methadone's not long enough."

Most methadone addicts do dream of getting off the drug some day. But of more immediate importance is not needing a shot of heroin.

Mary Hemby got on methadone after losing a good job at the New Jersey Bell telephone company, which she had maintained as a heroin addict for 16 years. She lost the job when she and her boyfriend began mixing heroin and cocaine.

"We were staying awake seven, eight and nine days, hallucinating and crawling on the floor with guns like idiots," she said.

Hemby found herself in Texas, divorced her husband and embarked on a life as a prostitute.

"I lived under the bridge in a cardboard box with another man. [redacted] [redacted], who was very jealous," said the frail woman. "He would beat me. I went around with broken ribs and black eyes. If he wasn't beating me from jealousy, he would beat me for not working enough."

Like many heroin addicts seeking a way out, Hemby found herself embracing God and methadone.

"You get tired of being out there," she said. "You get tired of running, so you use this methadone program. It gives you a chance to get healthy."

She met her current husband on the streets. He was the first to decide to give up heroin for methadone. Hemby resisted initially. But then she got pregnant at 41 and it spurred her to quit.

"You can't get on the methadone program and take that first drink and expect miracles to happen," said Hemby, who now works as a waitress. "You have to have a support system, but the main thing is, you've got to want to."

Hemby and her husband lost their child. Still, she has remained off opiates while combating cancer and hepatitis. The methadone has helped her tackle the pain that got her hooked on heroin to begin with.

"It was the perfect excuse to do dope," said Hemby, with a wry smile. "So I'm proud of myself. I've spent my whole life looking for excuses."