

Video: How to maintain sobriety during a pandemic

June 11 2020

Addiction thrives in isolation, so sheltering in place and social distancing during COVID-19 can be challenging for people in recovery as well as for those who are susceptible to substance misuse.

"With bars closed down, there may be less exposure to alcohol, which can be an advantage. But, typically, if someone really wants to drink or use, they will find a way," says Andrew Finch, an addiction expert and professor at Vanderbilt Peabody College of education and human development. "Loneliness, fear, stress and anxiety all can trigger a relapse or substance misuse."

First and foremost, it is important for those in recovery to make sure their [support systems](#) are in place.

"Meetings can be found online, and supportive peers are still just a call or text away," Finch says. "Also, it's always important, but especially now, to maintain good health practices such as getting plenty of sleep, practicing mindfulness, exercising and eating healthy foods."

During these unprecedented times, even those not in recovery are susceptible to substance misuse. With dire news reports fueling fear and uncertainty, people who normally don't overindulge may say yes to a second, third or fourth glass of wine after a long day of balancing work, [child care](#) and social distancing.

Mental health concerns will likely persist long after the quarantine ends,

as people process depression, anxiety and [traumatic stress](#) as a consequence of the change and losses brought about by the pandemic.

"Some people may feel trapped in a challenging family circumstances and may see alcohol as an escape," Finch says. "Without healthy outlets, one's alcohol and other drug intake could spiral, creating stress in relationships and increase the risk of abuse and injury to self or others. If you notice a friend who appears to be developing a substance problem, express concern and a willingness to help before things get to an unmanageable place."

He adds that alcohol can weaken the immune systems, which put people at risk of getting sick. The key is finding healthy ways to manage stress, including counseling sessions through a telehealth platform.

Finch also suggests creating a [daily schedule](#) that includes breaks to process emotions, rather than using [substance misuse](#) to mask or bury feelings of loss or grief.

"We need to acknowledge and process all the losses that are occurring, from lost ceremonies (graduations, weddings, funerals, etc.) to jobs and relationships, and of course, in many cases, lost lives," he says. "We should not minimize people's feelings of grief right now. Making sure support systems are in place is vital to keep people from feeling that drinking is the only way to feel better."

Finch suggests visiting [Faces and Voices of Recovery](#) for links to online support.

Provided by Vanderbilt University

Citation: Video: How to maintain sobriety during a pandemic (2020, June 11) retrieved 6 May

2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-video-sobriety-pandemic.html>

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