

Working the steps during coronavirus can be tough. Experts offer tips on managing recovery

September 21 2020, by Angela Roberts, The Baltimore Sun



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A year ago, Brandee Izquierdo dredged up her roots from Woodlawn, Md., to make the hour move south to Charles County—leaving behind an area she had lived in for her entire life and the network of people who she had long leaned on as she recovered from addiction.

As she and her family settled into their new neighborhood, though, Izquierdo—executive director of the SAFE Project, a national nonprofit focused on ending the opioid epidemic—began knitting a new web of supporters, finding locals who were also working toward recovery.

Then, the coronavirus pandemic hit. And, Izquierdo said, "the floor dropped."

The thing with recovery, she explained, is that so much depends on structure and consistency. As the novel coronavirus set in, it vanquished firmly established routines, at the same time triggering mass job loss and seclusion—two forces that experts say can jolt people off their path to recovery. Over the summer, Maryland identified an uptick in opioid-related deaths during the first three months of 2020, a pattern that the American Medical Association has documented across the country.

Izquierdo is well aware of the dangers the pandemic has posed to those struggling with addiction. During the last few months, she knows people who have died from overdoses. Even so, she stressed, there's hope for those in recovery. Although the steps folks can take to stay afloat may look a little different now, they still exist.

"Recovery is a consistent evolution, and change is consistent. It's the only thing that's constant," Izquierdo said. "As long as we can go with the flow—kinda put our hands up and enjoy the ride—there's always hope."

September is National Recovery Month. The Baltimore Sun sought advice from addiction services and substance use disorder experts about how those in recovery can maintain their progress during the pandemic.

Address your most basic needs first

Don't have a safe place to stay? Dealing with unemployment? For those

struggling with addiction, addressing these needs is an important first step toward recovery, said Dr. Jessica Peirce, interim director of the Johns Hopkins University's Addiction Treatment Services and Center for Addiction and Pregnancy.

Seek professional help

Though the pandemic may have upended normal routines, help is still available. Peirce says those who are struggling should call their doctors for a referral to a treatment center.

They can also call 1-800-662-4357 for the Substance Abuse and Mental Services Administration's 24/7, 365-days-a-year helpline, or 410-433-5175 to speak with a trained counselor at Behavioral Health System Baltimore.

Stay connected with loved ones

To combat the effects of physical separation from loved ones, Jason Martin—Sheppard Pratt's addiction services director—urged those struggling with addiction to seek out human connection. Right now, he said, it's all too easy to just sit at home and sink into a depressive episode, which may in turn prompt people to seek comfort in substance use. Likewise, he encouraged those who have friends or [family members](#) struggling with addiction to reach out to their loved ones, even before they ask for help.

Take care of yourself

Although the pandemic may have thrown a wrench in techniques and activities folks have long relied upon in their [recovery](#), experts say these habits can be adapted for the age of COVID-19. Peirce said she's had

clients switch out going to the gym each morning for taking walks around a lake, or purchasing resistance bands to work out at home.

Practicing [self-care](#) doesn't have to cost much: Roxanne Fuentes, executive director for the Harbel Prevention and Recovery Center in Glenham-Belford, said one of her clients came up with \$10, and bought some supplies from the dollar store to transform her bedroom into a sanctuary.

Remember the reasons to be hopeful

Dr. Matthew Johnson, a Johns Hopkins University psychiatry and behavioral sciences professor, urged people not to fall into the trap of defining themselves by their slip-ups. Becoming obsessed with perceived failures can devolve into a self-fulfilling prophecy, he said, and research has shown that having previously attempted to recover from [addiction](#) is a predictor of long-term success.

So, Johnson said he doesn't care if it is somebody's first time seeking treatment, or their one thousandth time: They are capable of recovering. There is reason to be hopeful.

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Citation: Working the steps during coronavirus can be tough. Experts offer tips on managing recovery (2020, September 21) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-coronavirus-tough-experts-recovery.html>

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