

Pandemic can worsen odds for people recovering from addiction

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Drug use can increase the risks associated with COVID-19 infection, and at the same time, the social and psychological risks of the pandemic can intensify drug use.

Recovering from addiction is literally a life-and-death struggle in the best of times. In a [pandemic](#), it's even worse.

"Recovery from addiction involves reducing stress by connecting with others and sharing challenges and solutions with people who understand," said George Comiskey, an associate professor of practice in Texas Tech University's Community, Family & Addiction Sciences department and associate director for external relations for the Center for Collegiate Recovery Communities (CCRC). "The in-person connection is vital. It's important for people in recovery to have safe places where they can talk to other people where they have that connection and they are not alone."

Unfortunately, increased stress and [social isolation](#) seem to be the hallmarks of the COVID-19 era.

Stress

Comiskey, a licensed chemical dependency counselor, explained that people often increase alcohol or [drug use](#) during times of stress.

"In the days immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, New Yorkers' alcohol consumption increased by 25%," Comiskey said. "The same survey showed that 10% of people reported increased smoking and 3% reported increased cannabis use.

"We should not be surprised to see increased [substance abuse](#) during COVID-19 restrictions."

While it's still too early to have data on substance-use trends during COVID-19, sales data shows a dramatic uptick.

Over the last two weeks of March, as much of the country shut down in response to the pandemic, the Nielsen Corporation, a global marketing research firm, reported alcoholic beverage sales were up 55% from the same period in 2019. Ready-to-drink cocktails rose by 75%, purchases of 24- to 30-packs of beer grew by 90% and wine sales increased by 66%.

Such increases are expected to slow down as people are forced to focus on purchasing essentials, Comiskey noted, but for those with substance-use disorders, that, in itself, can be a stressful realization.

"If the virus continues for an extended [time](#)," he said, "people with disordered substance use will be forced to make decisions between their substance use and purchasing essentials such as food and medicines."

That "if" is one of the most stressful parts about the pandemic—it's the unknown.

Social isolation

While social distancing, isolation and quarantine are essential measures to prevent spreading COVID-19, they can cause a variety of potentially life-threatening problems.

"These strategies, and the pandemic outbreak itself, have been associated with negative emotions, such as irritability, anxiety, fear, sadness, anger or boredom," Comiskey said. "These conditions are known to trigger a relapse, even in long-term abstainers, or intensify drug consumption.

"A person who struggles with depression may develop suicidal thoughts during isolation. Disordered substance users or addicts may possibly overdose. A person who has recently exited addiction rehab is at risk of relapse due to the stress surrounding the pandemic. Individuals who were social drinkers could become heavy drinkers in an attempt to cope with the boredom of lockdown."

It's a catch-22, he explained. Drug use can increase the risks associated with COVID-19 infection, and at the same time, the social and psychological risks of the pandemic can intensify drug use.

"It's a potentially catastrophic cycle," Comiskey said. "This is a challenging time for all Americans, but we must resist making the situation worse by using addictive substances as a coping tool."

Instead, Comiskey emphasized doing the things that keep you healthy, like eating well, maintaining a consistent sleep schedule and exercising regularly.

"Besides adhering to a daily routine, the current times require additional coping mechanisms," Comiskey said. "Learn to manage how you consume information; choose reliable sources and don't overconsume. Do meaningful things with your free time. Most importantly, stay connected with others and maintain your social networks."

Helping the community

Because of the need to continue providing that essential support and connection for members of the recovery community at Texas Tech, the CCRC has gone virtual to maintain its programming.

"Our lobby, the hub of connection for our students, the place to check in and get support, is virtual," Comiskey said. "Our weekly community 'all-recovery' celebration is continuing virtually. We check in on students regularly and we ask them to come be with us in the lobby."

While much remains uncertain about the future of the pandemic, one definite thing is that the CCRC will continue to do whatever it can to help those in need.

"Adhering to university and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, we will reconnect safely," Comiskey said. "We'll take adequate precautions that will allow us to be here with and for students in recovery in a way that allows them to show up fully and connect with staff and peers."

Because of these unusual circumstances, many people who never before faced addiction may now find themselves in an unexpected situation.

"If a person is questioning whether they have problematic substance use, it's courageous to reach out for help," Comiskey emphasized.

Provided by Texas Tech University

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