**Substance Use Amidst COVID-19: What Does Problematic Use Look Like?**

Our natural response is to lean into things that make us feel better when we are under stress. But what happens if those things that make us feel better in the short term, actually cause us to feel worse in the long term?

The use of alcohol and other drugs to cope with mental health problems, relieve stress, as well as overcome boredom is not uncommon. When we feel unsafe or worry, many of us have the urge to get closer to others. Given our current situation, we’re unable to (in a physical sense) get closer to others; therefore, it makes sense that some people would turn to alcohol or other drugs to feel better. Even though using substances during times such as this may be *understandable or common,* it is a temporary solution that can lead to long-term negative effects for both our mental health and physical health, even suppressing immune response and increasing the likelihood of getting sick.

If you have been consuming alcohol or using other substances more, it’s important to understand what problematic use looks like. Start by paying attention to your use patterns, especially noting whether you’re increasing your intake over time. This may be harder to do while experiencing increased stress; therefore, you might want to keep track by writing it down in your phone or calendar.

Secondly, if you do notice an increase in your use make note of what your motivation is right before using. For example, if you notice that you are using to avoid certain feelings, because of anxiety or depression, or without thinking, it can become problematic. They key is to be honest with yourself on why and how often you’re using.

One thing you can do right now, is educate yourself on the signs and symptoms of substance abuse, potentially helping not only yourself, but also those around you. The signs and symptoms of alcohol and drug abuse and/or addiction include, among others:

* Feeling that you have to use regularly – daily or several times a day
* Having intense urges or cravings to use that block out any other thoughts
* As time progresses, needing more of the substance to get the same effect
* Consuming larger amounts of the substance over a longer period of time
* Spending money on the substance, even if you cannot afford it
* Not meeting obligations or work responsibilities, or cutting back on things you used to enjoy because of substance use
* Continuing to use the substance, despite negative consequences associated with your use

Of course, each individual is unique, and situations can vary; for example, some individuals with drinking problems don’t drink every day and not everyone who drinks every day has a problem. However, if you or a loved one are experiencing any of the symptoms described above, or if you are a person who has had substance use problems in the past, getting help and support now can be crucial to your overall health.

Additionally, with children and family at home and away from school, college, or work, it is important to take special precautions around the house to limit access to alcohol and drugs. Be mindful and monitor the quantity of substances you have in your home such as alcohol or prescription drugs. If you’re concerned about potential abuse in the household, consider safely securing substances; for example, put prescriptions in a lock box. Make yourself aware of the signs and symptoms of overdose, as well as what to do in case of overdose. You can learn more from SAMHSA [here](https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/treatment/opioid-overdose).

Keep in mind that any of our less-healthy coping mechanisms are still meeting a need. Denying that need won’t make them go away. Instead, acknowledge it and look for healthier alternatives that meet the same goal. Self-care techniques like getting exercise and sunlight, connecting with others, and regular sleep can help to alleviate stress and improve mood in ways that are both powerful and long-lasting. All in all, be mindful of your substance use during these times and do your best to take care of yourself, as well as one another.

**Note**: COVID-19 is a virus that attacks the lungs, making those with substance use disorders (SUD) particularly vulnerable. Individuals who smoke tobacco, marijuana or vape, as well as those with substance use disorders such as opioid use disorder and methamphetamine disorder may be especially at risk to COVID-19 and it’s more serious complications due to those drugs effects on respiratory and pulmonary health. If you are using substances take extra precautions in keeping yourself safe by following [harm reduction tips](https://harmreduction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID19-safer-drug-use-1.pdf), as well as frequent hand washing and physical distancing. You can learn more about how to protect yourself from the [Center for Disease Control](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html).

**Helpline:**

* [SAMHSA’s National Helpline](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline) – 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and informational services (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

**Virtual Recovery Programs:**

* [Alcoholics Anonymous Online Intergroup](http://aa-intergroup.org/directory.php)
* [SMART Recovery](https://www.smartrecovery.org/community/)
* [WEconnect and Unity Recovery](https://unityrecovery.org/)
* [Narcotics Anonymous](https://www.na.org/meetingsearch/text-results.php?country=Web&state&city&zip&street&within=5&day=0&lang&orderby=distance)
* [Marijuana Anonymous](https://ma-online.org/)
* [In The Rooms](https://www.intherooms.com/home/)

**Virtual Support Services for Families**

* [Learn to Cope](https://www.learn2cope.org/)
* [Al-Anon Family Groups](https://al-anon.org/)