

# COVID and Addiction Examined



By Jim Rachels

Many people across the world battle addiction issues. They battle every single day for their sobriety. As a result of COVID, many people have been suffering from their addiction issues now more than possibly ever. Dayry Hulkow, M.S. told Fox news that we have seen an increase in relapses. Many of us addicts live by a routine. It is a vital part of our recovery. Now many of us don't know where to turn for the support we need so much. Many addicts live meeting to meeting, it is their lifeline. So once you cut off this support, you are leaving countless addicts to fend for themselves and many of them have never been able to handle that.

One of the biggest things that many are struggling with is the isolation that most of us are going through. Many states and even countries have totally shut down. Another thing to note is that it's not just the addict population that is suffering from this, everyone is. But for us addicts, it really cuts us off from all the help we are typically used to getting. This means going to meetings, or just meeting with your sponsor and having a cup of coffee isn't allowed. These things might seem like minor problems for some but for us addicts, this is a major issue that threatens our recovery and for some, our lives.

Another thing to note is that people typically recover better when they are having face-to-face interactions with others in the addiction community. Being around other addicts fosters a feeling of community within the group. Without this tool, many will have a difficult road ahead. For some reason having this support can make a huge difference in our recovery.

For many, this can mean the difference between sobriety and using. Many facilities have started doing virtual programs instead of inpatient. Some places have replaced up to 50% of their outpatient programs with virtual meetings. Some have even come to the point that they have switched their entire program to virtual.

Something else to mention is that when an addict in recovery gets COVID, they are way more likely to have a worse outcome as compared to people with no addiction issues. It shows that we addicts are much more likely to contract COVID.

Thanks to zoom and software like it, at least we are able to connect virtually. With the progression of the pandemic, many groups have embraced and used virtual meetings as a replacement for in-person meetings. But many still feel isolated and cut off from everything they once depended upon to keep them sober.

Another thing that should be noted is that the suicide rate has also increased as a result of the pandemic. Many people that have been battling substance abuse issues have not been able to handle their demons.

So what are we to do in order to battle this feeling of loneliness that is happening as a result of the pandemic? I think the first thing is that you don't isolate yourself and lose touch with friends and family. This is an unprecedented pandemic, the likes that have not been seen since the last influenza pandemic which happened in 1918. We need to prepare ourselves more than ever for the months that we will be in isolation. We need to stay in touch with all our friends and family and not change that routine. Also, utilize the tools to stay in touch with the addiction community. Many groups like Addicts Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous have all embraced online meetings. Remember these are just as important as face-to-face meetings and you need to really give it all your attention.

We all need to get a toolbelt together. These are things that will be of use to us when we're struggling and are in need of support. This can be a meeting, a friend or maybe something along the lines of prayer or meditation. We need to have these things to turn to in times of need. Let's see some of the stats. The Overdose Protection Mapping Application Program for ODMAP came up with these statistics through their research.

- 17.6% increase in overdoses during stay-at-home orders between March 19 and May 19
- 42% increase in nationwide overdoses in May of 2020 alone
- 30% spike in overdose alerts following the stay-at-home orders
- 20% spike in weekly alerts since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

These are some pretty significant numbers. Now, this was just one piece of research done. I think we need to be prepared to see that these numbers are in fact possibly much worse than has been reported. There are a lot of people that are not included in this research. The thought of this is a very scary prospect. When we think about the fact that COVID is quite possibly here to stay for quite a while, the overdose and death rates may continue to rise.

Studies have also shown that binge drinking has increased dramatically. And all while this is happening many treatment centers and rehabs are closing their doors leaving many addicts to try to handle their own detox and then try to maintain their sobriety with absolutely no help. For many addicts, this is going to be a long and hard road to try to travel on. Not to mention how dangerous detoxing on your own can be.

From a NY Times article - "Before the coronavirus outbreak, just one in 10 Americans suffering substance-use disorders got the treatment they needed. The CDC and the National Center for Health Statistics reported

that 81,230 people died of drug overdoses in the 12-month period ending in May 2020, the largest number of drug overdoses ever recorded in a year.”

For those lucky enough to have a bed in a rehab facility, life might be a bit easier during the detox phase of your sobriety. But even those lucky few have had many resources cut off. Counselors have stopped coming in as well as outside peer support such as AA or NA who typically have people coming down to the rehabs and chairing meetings for the residents of the rehab facility.

So what can we do to help combat this terrible reality? One thing can be practicing harm reduction by doing things such as a safe injection site. There's a saying, “Dead people don't recovery.” This is unfortunately the cold hard truth. We need to provide addicts with a safe judgment-free zone in which to use their drugs. This might seem odd to some but this has been shown to reduce AIDS, Hepatitis C and death as a result of an overdose.

If one was trying to see the good that came from this, we should recognize that addiction issues are being discussed more now. The pandemic made addiction issues so bad that even some companies have been forming their own policies and groups to help people suffering from a substance. I think this shows a lot of promise to change the way people see addicts. I think hopefully this will help show that addicts are sick people, not bad people that have unfixable character defects. It should also show that it can affect anyone no matter their background.

John Driscoll, head of recovery services at Hazelden Betty Ford, has stated that some of their sessions that are hosted virtually have in some cases doubled in attendance. Mental health professionals were very unprepared for the pandemic. Isolation was something each and every one of us needed to get used to and get through this period of time. So everyone is learning to do this as they go along with the programs. It is a learning curve for everyone and it is a difficult thing to do.

What do we do if we relapse? That is an extremely important question for us to ask ourselves. The first thing I would recommend is to reach out for help. This can be a family member, friend or sponsor. Especially during these times when we're already isolated, we should try to have the right community built up around us. In times when we can't go to an in-person meeting, it's important to try to find community virtually. You should also be on the lookout for triggers.

Maybe last time we had no plan in place for our relapse prevention and recovery in general. This time we should take some time and put forth the effort to come up with a solid relapse prevention plan. Examine the things that happened leading up to the relapse event itself. Did something change in our lives? Did we have an argument with a close friend or family

member? Is there stress at work? These are just some of the more general questions to ask ourselves when we are trying to get to the root cause of what really happened. Once we identify the issue, we need to make an effort to change this. Sometimes this might be a difficult thing to do but for the sake of our happiness and sobriety it needs to be done.

In conclusion, COVID has had a huge impact on the way people are recovering these days. With the rise of zoom meetings available, many people will choose these meeting platforms over the in-person meeting that are now starting to reopen. Some will still prefer the in-person meetings. This will forever change the landscape and the way the traditional AA and NA programs typically do things. As recovering addicts, we must use the tools we have available to us and which make us most comfortable. We should not let COVID and the changes that have happened be an excuse to give up on our recovery. With hard work and discipline, this can be done. Don't give up, our lives depend on it.