

Medical Director Outlines Potential Risks to Recovering Addicts During COVID-19

COVID-19 puts addicts at high risk of relapse, overdose and death



Charlotte, Apr 13, 2020 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - As the United States is brought to its knees by the Coronavirus outbreak, the fear and panic surrounding the pandemic have created an especially dangerous situation for those suffering from substance use and mental health disorders as well as people in long-term addiction recovery.

Stress is a long-known cause of addiction and relapse and the COVID-19 virus is creating stressors on a scale that is unprecedented in our modern times. Stay-at-home orders, loneliness, societal changes, job security concerns, and general fears surrounding the pandemic, all create significant pressures that can lead a person to relapse or develop a substance abuse problem.

Self-isolating is now a necessity, but addiction thrives in isolation. Loneliness is a significant cause of substance abuse and relapse. Combined with the stressors mentioned above, it is the recipe for devastation.

Furthermore, active substance abusers are more susceptible to infection from COVID-19, due to the damaging effects of drugs and alcohol on the body's systems. In addition to the issues with smoking and vaping on the lungs (both Tobacco and Marijuana), substances like heroin and methamphetamine

cause pulmonary, respiratory and immune system damage that can put users at greater risk should they contract COVID-19.

More than ever, it is vital that those who are in need get treatment. Addiction does not stop because of stay-at-home orders, nor does the risk of overdose and death subside because of a pandemic.

These risks existed before but have been exacerbated by the outbreak and reduced accessibility to care and support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings. We are likely to see an increase in substance abuse-related deaths in the wake of this pandemic.

Harmony Recovery Group's North Carolina Medical Director, Dr. Jill Thompson said,

"With this situation, you have stress, fear of the unknown, and actually on top of that boredom plays a role. Certainly, if a person in recovery is more bored than usual and under a lot of stress, it will contribute to their potential for relapse. Additionally, many addicts are dual diagnoses which means they also have mental health conditions and these are exacerbated by being locked in the house where they're isolated and feeling anxious and paranoid about everything going on.

Lots of support options that once existed are gone now. A large majority of facilities have closed or aren't taking new patients. We certainly had those conversations but we decided we would continue to treat patients as we felt it was such an important service. So we are taking every precaution in order to keep our patients, staff, and their families safe. I spent the whole day today testing patients for Coronavirus.

When a patient leaves rehab, it is important that they try to reintegrate into society by getting jobs and so forth. But, now a lot of them lose their jobs and suddenly they feel like they are back where they started: not having money, not having a job, potentially losing their home. All of these factors contribute to a markedly increased risk of relapse. Furthermore, so many of them depend on group support but they can no longer attend meetings. They can't spend 3-5 nights a week going to their AA or NA meetings anymore. So they have decreased support, decreased services, financial concerns, increased stress. It's really a big problem.

When a patient comes in and they've been in treatment ten times before and you ask them, 'what's the longest you've been sober?' and they say a year or 18 months, and you asked them how they stayed sober during that time, the answer is always the same. They kept busy: they were going to meetings, they had a job, they were getting lots of support, keeping up with their doctor visits. And now, all of that goes away. You throw on top of it all the anxiety and unknown surrounding the pandemic and it's really a problem. It's very sad and concerning.

As hard as we are all having it with this crisis, many people are feeling it worse than others and I think addicts may be close to the top of that list because the risks are so severe. Relapse is another step closer to death, especially with the drugs on the streets now— Fentanyl, etc.— the risk of overdose is so high. Every time they relapse could be the very last time because they aren't going to make it out alive. It's a problem on so many fronts, we are keeping our doors open as long as possible and implementing telehealth options to continue the fight for recovery."

Harmony Recovery Group is an addiction treatment and recovery program with locations in Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Our approach treats alcohol and drug addiction, as well as trauma, mood disorders, depression, anxiety, and other often co-occurring conditions.

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