Recovery During A Pandemic

Whether dealing with mental illness and/or addiction, recovery is hard in the best of times.

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing our way of living. As our state, our nation, and our world continue to face this pandemic, we continue to practice social distancing, work from home, work in a high risk location, homeschool children, experience job loss, confront food insecurity, and live in an environment of extreme uncertainty. This pandemic that represents a substantial challenge for everyone may have compounding effects for individuals in recovery.

The experience of this pandemic will have an adverse impact on many individuals who may face increasing incidences of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse. Individuals who have previously experienced or are currently facing a mental illness and/or a substance use disorder may find themselves experiencing trepidation about the maintenance of their overall health and recovery and may encounter a reemergence of prior symptoms and behaviors.

Trying to maintain recovery when while simultaneously dealing with so many other abnormal things makes recovery that much more difficult. More than ever individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder may find themselves thinking or even obsessing about having a relapse. Others may experience increased anxiety and fear that weigh heavily on their minds as they work to maintain their mental health. And, maybe the most frustrating thing about maintaining recovery during this time, is feeling disconnected or feeling like they have to do it alone, as their normal pathways to support, such as 12 step meetings or drop-in centers cannot be accessed the way they were in the past.

First and foremost, it is very important to help individuals recognize that they are not alone in their experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting everyone, and many people who have never experienced anxiety or depression, or worried about their drinking and drug use now find themselves in a position of having to deal with feelings that they have never had to deal with before.

Hope for the Future

With all that is going on around us, as we all see and hear regularly of the angst, fear, and outright anger concerning the pandemic, and our overall response, we must find a way to offer hope that not only can we deal with the pandemic, but that we can help and support individuals with a mental illness and/or substance use disorder.

“Remember that the emotions you may be experiencing are normal reactions to difficult circumstances. Accept that things are different right now and everyone is adjusting. Prioritize what’s most important and know that it’s okay to let some things go right now.

Be kind to yourself and others. Try to stay positive and use this time to spend more time with your children or spouse, try things you’ve been putting off, such as taking an online class, learning a new skill, or getting in touch with your creative side.

It can be hard to think past what is going on today, let alone in a week or in six months, but give yourself permission to daydream about the future and what is on the horizon. Remember that this is temporary, and things will return to normal.” ~ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

If you are feeling overwhelmed with emotions such as sadness, depression, anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or someone else, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

Connect with the Crisis Text Line for free, confidential, 24/7 support by texting 4Hope to 741-741
How You Can Provide Support and Help to Others in Recovery

If you know others that need support following are several things you can do to help. Additionally, reaching out to others will also benefit you by providing a sense of connection and fulfillment from helping others.

- Practice STRIVE for 5. The concept is very simple. Find five people in your life and check-in with them every day for the next 30-days. This can help individuals and families cope with feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation by connecting with others.
- Understand that individuals in recovery, like all individuals, react differently to stress and anxiety. Make sure you listen to them to learn what they need vs. what you may think they should need.
- Help individuals in recovery understand that these are extremely unusual times, it is not unexpected that they may be struggling even if they have years of recovery.
- Help the person in recovery deal with their own internalized stigma, or sense of failure that they are once again having to really work their recovery.
- When possible, be present whether via technology or in-person with appropriate social distancing.
- When necessary help individuals in need of professional help access a treatment program or counselor.
- Make sure that you are also taking care of yourself!

Maintaining Your Recovery During the Pandemic

- First and foremost, recognize that what you are experiencing is not abnormal, these are unprecedented times and many people are having to deal with stress, anxiety, and fear. Acknowledge your feelings.
- Prioritize your recovery and practice self-care.
- Stay connected with your networks of support.
- Be educated, but limit time watching the news and on social media reading about the pandemic, this will help reduce negative thinking.
- Recognize that people will react differently to the pandemic, to social distancing, and to seeing things begin to open back up, so your normal support networks may not be as available or the same as they were in the past.
- Know and recognize your red flags and triggers. Acknowledge that, in these times, new ones may develop.
- Practice your recovery skills, use your tools, and if you need to ask for help, do so.
- Develop a routine of healthy practices such as eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep, connecting with others, meditating, and making time to have fun.

Recovery IS Beautiful, is so apt at this time, not just in dealing with addiction and mental illness, but in all of us recovering from this pandemic. Dealing with our feelings and practicing the skills of recovery such as: connection, tolerance, forgiveness, openness, and honesty, with ourselves and each other, will help all of us move forward in a way that can be positive regardless of the stresses and anxiety we experience along the way. Remember - This Too Shall Pass.