Coping with Substance Misuse during COVID-19

What is Substance Misuse?
Throughout history people have used substances to alter their ways of thinking and feeling. This has provided a relief or an escape from the sometimes monotonous experience of daily living. Mood altering substances have also been used recreationally to enhance enjoyment of certain activities or events. Societies have varied on their definitions of which substances are permissible from a legal standpoint and on the ages at which people are determined to be able to exercise sound judgment regarding the use of these substances. For our purposes, we are talking about alcohol and certain drugs as the focused substances in these considerations.

A pandemic can create certain challenges regarding the use or the misuse of drugs and alcohol. While drug or alcohol use may not be problematic in normal conditions, the stress and disruption caused by a pandemic can produce patterns of use that may involve using more of the substance than is commonly used, or using the substance more frequently or for a longer period of time than is typical.

When patterns of drug or alcohol use become extensive, they tend to bring accompanying features of dysfunction and often result in different problems. Some of these negative outcomes can be physical, such as withdrawal when the period of use is stopped, or they can be social, such as how other people are treated when someone is under the influence. In addition, the effects can be behavioral such as being unable to discontinue use or engaging in activities that are dangerous to perform under the influence of the substance, such as driving.

How can I recognize when there is a problem?
The first realization of a problem that someone misusing substances, or people close to the substance misusing individual, may have occurs when problematic patterns of misuse continue even when the person expresses regret for their use and intent to make a change. Knowing you don’t like how you are using drugs and alcohol or how you act when you are under the influence, but being unable to make a change, are signs you likely have a problem with substance misuse.

Recognizing the problem and acknowledging that it is a problem is the first step. This is sometimes difficult as it is not always something someone wants to admit is true about themselves. Supportive and direct conversations may be needed to bring this recognition about. Sometimes these conversations have to be repeated before they make a difference and the person fully acknowledges that their drug or alcohol use really is a problem.

What do I do when I recognize the problem?
There are many different options when it comes to addressing substance misuse. These range from self-help strategies, to group meetings, to professional help.

Self-Help Strategies
Once someone recognizes they are misusing drugs or alcohol, they may want to make an initial attempt to change their pattern of use on their own. The inability to follow
through with this intent is a sign the problem is more serious than the person may realize. It is at this point the substance misusing person will need to get help from other people and resources.

**Group Strategies**
Admitting their problem to someone identified as a helping individual is necessary for the help from others to be effective. Recovery support meetings and 12 Step groups consist of other people who have struggled with substance misuse themselves and who have discovered solutions. Many of those people involved in these groups see helping other people misusing substances as an important step in their own progress. Often, they call this progress their recovery.

12 Step or recovery support meetings are in just about every community. During a pandemic, they are more easily and safely accessed online. An online search for these meetings reveals that there are meetings happening somewhere in the world that can be accessed via computer just about every hour of the day or night.

**Professional Strategies**
Professional help becomes necessary when the negative effects of someone’s misuse of substances are extremely harmful or when non-professional support groups have not proven sufficient. Professional help may need to vary in terms of the kinds of services that are provided and the intensity of these services. For example, some people whose misuse of substances has created patterns of physical dependency and withdrawal need medical treatment as well as psychological treatment if they are going to safely make a change to their patterns of use. Medical professionals should be consulted as someone takes the beginning steps to discontinue substance misuse.

The intensity of professional treatment services for substance misuse can vary from weekly meetings with a counselor to inpatient hospitalization, with many levels of treatment intensity in between. Treatment intensity is determined based on need, and a thorough assessment by a treatment professional is necessary to determine the level of care needed.

Substance misuse treatment is provided to individuals and often also to groups of people. Interactions with other people also working to overcome substance misuse can be a very helpful and rewarding part of treatment.

The Center for Mental Health is a resource for community members to get help when they need it whether in times of normal stress or pandemic. The goal of The Center for Mental Health is to provide help, hope, and healing and to cultivate communities of wellness where every life is lived to its fullest. Please contact The Center for Mental Health at 970.252.3200 if you would like to work with a professional counselor for help dealing with substance misuse.

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**The Center Support Line**

A free, 24-hour talk line open to our community during difficult times. If you are feeling stressed, anxious, or just need someone to talk to, call—we can help.

**The Center Support Line: 970.252.6220**

[CMH](http://www.centermh.org) • Call 970.252.3200 to learn more or to make an appointment.