

PTSD AND COVID-19



PREVENTING SUBSTANCE USE RELAPSE BECAUSE OF THE EMOTIONAL TRAUMA OF COVID-19

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a serious mental health condition that often arises when someone has been exposed to a traumatic, potentially life-threatening event. PTSD survivors often have witnessed accidents, warfare, severe illness, domestic violence, acts of terrorism or other tragedies that threatened or caused loss of life. They typically experience severe emotional distress, including heightened anxiety, depression, fearfulness, panic, nightmares and “flashbacks,” in which they relive the terror of traumatic events.

We often think of PTSD in relation to soldiers returning from the battlefield or survivors of automobile/plane crashes. Any event, however, that involves threat of death can cause PTSD. For example, PTSD survivors often include mothers who have miscarried; children who are abandoned, neglected, physically or sexually abused; those who have endured domestic violence; lived through premature, accidental or suicide deaths of loved ones; cancer and heart attack survivors. All may encounter severe emotional trauma that can lead to PTSD.

Substance abuse is an illness inherently rife with trauma. When substance use becomes unmanageable, it creates chaos in users' personal lives and job performance. It ruins relationships, ravages self-esteem, creates financial ruin, and destroys emotional and physical health. Depending on the type and severity of substance use, users often experience a myriad of traumatic events: multiple emergency room visits, near-death experiences from accidental overdoses, as well as witnessing the untimely overdose deaths of friends and family. In addition, to support their habit, users may find themselves doing demeaning tasks for money, including stealing and prostitution, which go against their sense of values and morality. They may uncharacteristically become violent or victims of violence. Many will have been arrested and spent time in jail as though they were common criminals instead of human beings in need of help. It is little wonder, therefore, that many in substance use recovery find themselves struggling not only to refrain from substance use, but to manage PTSD.

PANDEMIC-RELATED TRAUMA MIMICS PTSD

Nearly everyone has experienced the loss of someone to COVID-19. The uncertainty, chaos, and loss of life wreaks havoc on our mental health and precludes our former sense of calm, peace, safety, and security. This nightmare situation creates a whirlwind of negative, traumatic emotions, including disbelief, shock, anxiety, worry and panic, sadness, grief, depression, and fears about loss of life – intense negative emotions that flood our mind, heart, psyche and soul, and mimic PTSD.

In fact, the totality of stress, sadness and trauma associated with COVID-19 creates a surreal environment that shakes us to the very core of our beings. Even brief, limited exposure to pandemic horrors causes deep unrest. For many, turning on the TV to watch five minutes of daily news may lead to five hours of insomnia that evening. As we recount shocking, horrific images of death/dying, we are flooded by painful images and trauma akin to PTSD flashbacks.

The temptation to self-medicate pandemic-related PTSD with substances risks relapse.

Those recovering from alcohol, illicit drug or prescription medication abuse, are particularly vulnerable to struggling to manage everyday stress, let alone pandemic stress. Whereas in the past, substance use masked their negative emotions, they must now face emotional upsets head-on. Their emotions often feel raw, so that relatively minor stressful situations, such as the frustration of waiting in a checkout line or traffic jam may push them completely over the edge. They may become easily emotionally flooded, and experience negative emotions like an incoming tsunami, creating a wake of devastation in its path. Because their ability to cope without substances is not yet fully developed, they may find few resources to fall back on in their yet-evolving coping skill repertoire. Whether newly recovered or a seasoned abstinence/sobriety veteran, managing pandemic-related PTSD may push them beyond their ability to cope. The temptation to self-medicate trauma with substances may prove irresistible, ultimately leading to relapse.

Sheltering-in-place safety precautions can lead to boredom and loneliness, well-known triggers for substance use relapse.

PANDEMIC SHELTER-IN-PLACE REQUIREMENTS CAN INCREASE RISK OF SUBSTANCE USE RELAPSE

In an effort to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19, many are following expert medical advice to shelter-in place. While we recognize the importance of heeding and upholding this advice, mandatory isolation undoubtedly takes its toll on our psychological health. Sheltering-in-place often means sacrificing social interactions with extended family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and community. For the most part, it means isolating at home *alone*. This artificial estrangement can cause intense loneliness and boredom – two powerful triggers commonly associated with substance use relapse.

MANAGING BOREDOM AND LONELINESS TO PREVENT RELAPSE

Maintaining abstinence and sobriety does not happen by accident. Like anything else we choose to be successful at, it requires much energy, effort and planning. Remembering how hard you have worked to achieve your recovery, its positive impact on your life and the lives of the ones you love, may help motivate you to adopt the most stringent recovery plans in the face of pandemic-related PTSD.

Managing recovery during a pandemic requires us to recognize the enormity of the emotional threats to abstinence/sobriety and reevaluate our current recovery strategies. Just as we take our cars in for routine maintenance, it's a good idea to conduct a "tune-up" to fortify one's recovery plans against relapse.

Here are some tips to guard against pandemic-related loneliness and boredom:

BOREDOM

Boredom is a potent relapse trigger that can be particularly hard to bear for long periods of time. Let's face it – feeling dull, restless, and weary is the antithesis of fun and excitement. The monotony of daily life while sheltering-in-place can quickly become beyond tedious. The result: strong temptations to chase substances for a moment of exhilaration. And, the more you convince yourself that you cannot bear boredom another minute, the more likely is relapse. Strategies to battle boredom:

- **CREATE A STRUCTURED, DAILY ROUTINE**, balanced by must-do tasks and fun activities.
- **RECOGNIZE THAT MANY OF US ACHIEVE MUCH MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE THROUGH OUR WORK**, If home from work, it may be necessary to identify new, meaningful pursuits that provide interest and a sense of accomplishment.
- **ADOPT HEALTHY EATING HABITS** by being sure to eat nutritious meals and snacks, including not skipping breakfast. (Skipping meals lowers blood sugar, reduces physical and emotional well-being.) Hunger is also a physical state often associated with increased substance use cravings.
- **FIND A WAY TO EXERCISE EITHER INDOORS OR SAFELY OUTDOORS**. Don a mask and go for a walk. Ride an indoors exercise bike. Create your own "Tik Tok" dance to music. Lift weights. Use free, cable tv guided exercise routines.
- **RECONNECT TO HOBBIES YOU ONCE ENJOYED AND IDENTIFY NEW INTERESTS**. Read a novel, do a crossword puzzle, enjoy painting, ceramics or other crafts, do gardening, find a quiet spot to go fishing or camping, learn a new language, or put together a photo album of family favorites.
- **COMPLETE HOUSEHOLD PROJECTS** that have been lingering on your to-do list for years.
- **LISTEN TO MUSIC, RELAXATION TAPES OR DO MEDITATION.**

- **REMEMBER THAT WHILE BOREDOM IS ANNOYING AND UNCOMFORTABLE, IT WILL PASS.**
- **APPLAUD YOURSELF FOR MANAGING BOREDOM** and preventing relapse!

LONELINESS

Loneliness is another common trigger for relapse, and one which many of us are facing while sheltering-in-place. For those in recovery, there may be a tendency to blame oneself for loneliness. It is important to remember that entering recovery often means losing close relationships with friends and family who choose to continue using substances. Recovery often involves creating an entirely new “family” and social support system.

If you are encountering the emotional pain of loneliness, remember there are others with whom you can connect. While support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) are not meeting in-person during this pandemic, online and phone meetings are readily available. You can also request the help of a “sponsor,” who can act as your personal confidant, recovery coach and friend to assist you in battling loneliness and staying on task with your recovery. (Find a list of support group resources at the end of this article.)

Additional suggestions for combating loneliness:

- **DON'T ASSOCIATE LONELINESS WITH UNWORTHINESS.** Remember that you are worthy of friendship and love, and that many are struggling with feeling sad and alone.
- **TALK TO NEIGHBORS**, old friends, and members of your church or a former social club for encouragement and support. Use social media to reconnect.
- **CONNECT WITH “SAFE” EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS** who will treat you kindly and with whom you have fallen out-of-touch. Phone your great aunt and uncle to touch base. Share fond family memories and find out how they are coping during the pandemic.
- **PRACTICE GRATEFULNESS** by reaching out to thank those who assisted you in the early days of your recovery.
- **TAKE AN ACTIVE INTEREST IN OTHERS** by checking in on elderly acquaintances and offering them help with grocery shopping or other needs.
- **CONSIDER REACQUAINTING YOURSELF WITH SPIRITUAL SUPPORTS** that bring you comfort and solace.

- **QUIET SELF-CRITICISM**, and instead remind yourself of your strong survivor skills that have helped you weather storms in the past.
- **RECOGNIZE** that while pandemic-related loneliness feels interminable, this situation is temporary and will end.

FACING TOO MANY SIMULTANEOUS STRESSORS CHALLENGES US ALL, AND PARTICULARLY THOSE IN RECOVERY.

If you are feeling overwhelmed trying to cope with too many pandemic-related stressors simultaneously, you are not alone. Many are struggling with having one or more family members out of work, facing financial crises in which they have no funds for food, utilities, credit card bills, or paying for their rent/mortgage to keep a roof over their heads. Many have either contracted COVID-19 themselves, or are worried about whether elderly or immune-compromised friends and family will survive if they contract the virus. Many struggle to maintain their physical and emotional health during this time of unprecedented threats to our health, safety and sanity.

Rather than allow ourselves to become emotionally immobilized, it helps to maintain a positive, proactive stance. This involves avoiding catastrophic thoughts in which you falsely convince yourself that the worst possible outcomes you can imagine will happen. Instead, as challenging as it seems, take stock in evaluating what kinds of help you need and reassure yourself that others may be able to offer practical resources and emotional support.

No matter how much personal strength and resolve we possess, there are limits to how many pressures any human being can face. If you are feeling overwhelmed, don't hesitate to reach out to the BAC Member Assistance Program (MAP) for free, confidential assistance by licensed mental health and substance abuse professionals. We can help you locate practical assistance, maintain your emotional health, and work together to weather this pandemic while preventing relapse.

Active and retired BAC members and their families are eligible for free MAP services. Remember that your union cares, and that help is only a phone call away. Give MAP a call today, toll-free at 1-888-880-8222. MAP is generally open from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. EST Monday through Friday; however, after-hours appointments are available during this pandemic.

Confused about where to find resources for food, utilities, mortgage/rental assistance? Visit the BAC MAP web page at: <https://bacweb.org/member-service/member-assistance-program-map> or call MAP today toll-free at 1-888-880-8222.

SUPPORT GROUP RESOURCES TO HELP MAINTAIN ABSTINENCE, SOBRIETY AND WELLNESS.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (AA)

Anyone who may be seeking help with a drinking problem may visit www.aa.org for information about A.A.

For local A.A. resources: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/find-aa-resources

Options for online meetings: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/options-for-meeting-online

NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS (NA)

Online/phone meetings are available:

<https://www.na.org/meetingsearch/>.

MARIJUANA ANONYMOUS (MA)

Online/phone meetings are available:

<http://marijuana-anonymous.org/find-a-meeting/>.

COCAINE ANONYMOUS (CA)

Online/phone meetings are available:

<http://marijuana-anonymous.org/find-a-meeting/>.

<https://www.ca-online.org/>

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT GROUPS

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)

<https://www.nami.org/Find-Support>

BAC
MAP
Member
Assistance
Program



UNITED STATES and CANADA

1-888-880-8222