

Session 3: Covid-19 ADDENDUM

You have just learned in session 3 today about various skills and strategies you can use to help your family member through a crisis should one emerge. You have also learned about various types of resources that are available for mental health crises and emergencies. During COVID-19, you can draw from these same skills, strategies, and resources, though there may be additional factors to consider. This addendum provides:

- Information about substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Additional considerations about handling suicidal or aggressive behavior during COVID-19
- Guidance around making a crisis plan if you or your family member contracts COVID-19

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Substance Use

There is evidence to suggest that the risks associated with substance use have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Centre for Disease Control outlines some additional risk factors associated with substance use during COVID-19, which include:

- Inability to obtain drugs due to supply shortages or social distancing, which in turn can lead to withdrawal symptoms
- Illicit drug supply disruptions could also lead individuals to consume drugs they are not used to, which might increase risk of overdose or other adverse reactions due to contaminated supply
- Reduced access to harm reduction services and in-person treatment options
- Physical distancing guidance and stay-at-home orders may lead to higher numbers of people using substances alone, without others around to administer naloxone, perform life-saving measures, or call for help in case of overdose.
- Bystanders to an overdose might be reluctant to administer naloxone or perform CPR or other life-saving measures because of fear of COVID-19 exposure.
- People may be afraid to seek medical attention in the Emergency Department (ED) or from other healthcare professionals for fear of infection. (Centre for Disease Control, 2020)

Helping Your Family Member with Problematic Substance Use During COVID-19

You have learned in this session today how to communicate with your family member about alcohol and substance use. While these tools still apply, you may notice some additional challenges relating to helping your family member manage their substance use challenges, including:

- **Disruptions to service:** Due to COVID-19, there may be changes or reductions in services for people experiencing substance use challenges. It is important to talk to a healthcare provider to learn more about what services will be available during COVID-19. As some in-person treatment options may not be available, you may also consider encouraging your family member to connect with available virtual recovery meetings or local treatment services and supports.

- **Identifying the signs of problematic substance use:** As you may not be having as much in person contact with your family member, it may be more challenging to identify if an increase in substance use is occurring. Through your regular virtual check ins with your family member, it is important to keep the lines of communication open regarding this, especially if your family member has experienced problematic substance use in the past, and/or if they are in a recovery program.
- **Coping with stress:** People in Canada who are staying at home more because of COVID-19 and consuming more alcohol indicated that they are doing so because of having no regular schedule, boredom, and stress, followed by loneliness.⁸ For these reasons, it is important to encourage your family member to maintain their regular schedule as much as possible, and to tap into their coping skills and healthy stress management options, such as hobbies, exercise, and connecting with support systems.

Information on Specific Substances

The resources included below provide further information about COVID-19 and some key points to keep in mind in relation to different substances.

General: Centre for Disease Control's FAQ about drug use and COVID-19: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/other-at-risk-populations/people-who-use-drugs/QA.html>

Alcohol: Drinking alcohol does not protect individuals from COVID-19, and can decrease the body's ability to fight off infections. https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/437608/Alcohol-and-COVID-19-what-you-need-to-know.pdf

Marijuana: The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) notes that there is current evidence that smoking cannabis can negatively affect people's respiratory and immune systems. Further, CCSA notes that "there is no evidence that smoking or vaping cannabis can prevent, alleviate or treat COVID-19 symptoms", and in fact that "cannabis smoking or vaping could worsen the respiratory symptoms of COVID-19". https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2020-04/CCSA-COVID-19-Cannabis-Smoking-and-Vaping-Report-2020-en_1.pdf

Cocaine and Methamphetamines: Using drugs such as cocaine and methamphetamines affects health and puts users at a greater risk of COVID-19. https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2020-05/CCSA-COVID-19-Methamphetamine-Cocaine-Health-Risks-Infographic-2020-en_0.pdf

Opioids: The intersection between COVID-19 and the "opioid epidemic" has been noted by various medical personnel and academics. Several urgent actions have been called for. <https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M20-1210>

⁸ Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, April 2020.

Suicide Risk of People with Psychosis During COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people with mental illness or mental health challenges may be at increased risk of suicide. There is some evidence that more suicides occur after previous pandemics⁹, which means there is a possibility for this to occur after COVID-19. Additional stressors can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair¹⁰, and social isolation may increase the risk of suicide in people with schizophrenia¹¹.

Family members who are already receiving treatment for suicide risk including those who are having suicidal thoughts and those who have had recent suicidal thoughts or a suicide attempt, may need additional support¹².

You learned much about suicide and responding to suicidal thoughts in Session 3 that can be applied during COVID-19 as well. Some additional points to keep in mind include:

- **Crisis and Emergency Services:** As we learned previously, crisis supports, emergency departments and 911 lines are still operating. Don't hesitate to call or visit your nearest emergency departments when necessary.
- **Safety Plans:** Review your family member's personal safety plan with them and adapt any information that needs to reflect the COVID-19 context. For example, have them brainstorm ideas about how to stay connected with supports and how to reach out to supports when physical distancing is at play. Discuss the new crisis lines that have been established due to COVID-19. Encourage them to add these additional ideas to their safety plan. As in pre-COVID-19 times, this should be done when your family member is not experiencing suicidal thoughts.
- **Stay Connected:** Having open lines of communication with your family member is more important than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. Create a network of family and friends who can stay connected with your family member especially during times of social isolation.
- **Surround yourself with supports:** The support of other family caregivers can make a huge difference in terms of how you cope with the stresses and worry of a suicidal family member. Seek out virtual family caregiver communities/peer support groups that may have been established with the onset of COVID-19, or which may have existed pre-COVID-19.

A Note on Aggressive Behaviors

Among people with schizophrenia, stress has been associated with aggressive behavior.¹³ Co-existing problematic substance use can exacerbate aggressive behavior in people diagnosed with schizophrenia¹⁴ as well. Maintaining treatment and recovery routines are important for reducing potential triggers of aggressive behaviors in people with schizophrenia or psychosis.

⁹ (Chan et al., 2006)

¹⁰ <https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/psychiatry/michigan-psychiatry-resources-covid-19/specific-mental-health-conditions/suicide-risk-recognizing-responding-risk-during-covid-19-pandemic>

¹¹ Montross LP, Zisook S, Kasckow J. Suicide among patients with schizophrenia: a consideration of risk and protective factors. *Ann Clin Psychiatry*. 2005;17(3):173-182.

¹² University of Michigan, Department of Psychiatry, 2020

¹³ (Volavka J, Citrome L. Pathways to aggression in schizophrenia affect results of treatment. *Schizophr Bull*. 2011;37(5):921-929).

¹⁴ Volavka, John, Aggression in Psychosis, February 2014

Completing a Family Crisis Plan for COVID-19

As you will remember, having a family crisis plan will help everyone to manage whatever crisis may occur. It is important to review your family crisis plan with your family member and consider if any aspect of that plan needs to be adapted to the COVID-19 context.

As well, it is important that your family crisis plan includes a plan should you become ill with COVID-19. If you are a primary caregiver for your family member, the adapted plan should identify who would play the roles you currently play if you become ill for an extended period of time.

Recommended Online Resources

https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2020-03/Tips_Active_Listening_COVID_eng.pdf

