

Telehealth Tips:
*Helping People with Co-Occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Conditions
During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The current need for physical distancing and isolation related to the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a quick expansion of the provision of behavioral health services via remote platforms. Additionally, because it attacks the lungs, COVID-19 could be an especially serious threat to those who smoke tobacco or marijuana or who vape. People with opioid use disorder (OUD) and methamphetamine use disorder may also be vulnerable due to those drugs' effects on respiratory and pulmonary health (6). Given the increased health risk, this presents an opportunity to help people manage cravings and maintain temporary abstinence to stay safe and stay inside. Here are some tips for evaluating and treating people with co-occurring disorders via telehealth.

Basic guidelines initiating contact

- Each time you contact the person you will need to re-engage.
- Reach out **without** an agenda (i.e., instead of pushing them to change, use motivational strategies to help them decide whether to address their current substance use).
- Secure the client's privacy during the telehealth session as much as possible (see your agency's telehealth guidelines).

Areas to address in the conversation

- Re-engage with message that you are calling about their welfare and ask how they are doing in the COVID-19 crisis.
- Inquire about their overall health and what other needs they have.
- Follow your agency's protocol regarding risk assessments for suicide, violence, overdose.
- Assess their level of anxiety and talk about alternatives for coping such as meditation. Here are some self-care activities that you can share:
 - Take deep breaths
 - Stretch your body
 - Listen to your favorite songs
 - Meditate (download the "UCLA Mindful" or other app on your phone through the app store or google play)
 - Read a chapter from a book
 - Journal your thoughts
 - Take a walk outside (wear a cloth mask, keep at least 6 feet away from other people)
 - Call a friend
 - Play games on the internet
 - Limit the amount of time watching or listening to information about COVID-19
- Go over with them who is in their support network.
 - Are they reaching out to friends and family via telephone, texting etc.?
 - Are they living alone, with roommates, or with family?
 - What is home life like? How stressful?
 - Are there people at the program that they can reach out to?
 - Let them know about remote services and supports (see below).

Go over your agency's COVID-19 safety protocol or follow [CDC protocol](#) (check for updates):

- Remind them the most important way to protect themselves is to maintain physical distance of at least 6 feet from other people as much as possible.

- Tell them to wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (a good measure of 20 seconds is singing happy birthday twice). If they aren't able to wash their hands, they should use a hand sanitizer if available.
- Ask whether they have a mask. If they don't have a mask, check with your program for available resources, including whether you can assist them in making their own cloth masks. Encourage them to follow the [NYS DOH recommendations for cloth masks](#).
- Tell them to avoid in person contact with people who are sick to the extent possible.
- Tell them to cover their cough and sneeze with a tissue and throw it immediately away in a lined trash can, or if they don't have a tissue, cough into the bend in their elbow. Wash hands with soap and water afterwards.
- Encourage them to keep their hands away from their eyes, nose, and mouth.

Use a harm reduction approach to discuss substance use, including tobacco

- With permission, ask about their substance use.
- Ask if they are still using the same substances.
- If they stopped a particular substance, ask about any withdrawal symptoms.
- Ask if they have access to medications to treat substance use (e.g., for opiate, alcohol or nicotine use) and, if not, whether they are interested in taking those medications. If yes; facilitate access.
- Raise issue of safety around substance use (more below); ask how and where they are getting substances.
- With permission, share with them that, because COVID attacks the lungs, it is an especially serious threat to those who smoke tobacco or marijuana or who vape. People with opioid use disorder (OUD) and methamphetamine use disorder may also be vulnerable due to those drugs' effects on lung health.

Talk to the person about remote services and support

- Tell them about the remote services and supports that your program is currently offering.
- Let them know about the OMH Emotional Support Helpline: 1-844-863-9314.
- Let them know about the OASAS hope line (staffed 24 hours a day): 1-877-8-HOPENY or text HOPENY.
- Let them know about [virtual recovery resources](#).

Talk to the person about safer drug and alcohol use

- **Frame the conversation as temporary abstinence.**
 - If they are interested in cutting down or stopping, offer them resources to do so.
 - Share with them that, even if they aren't interested in stopping, medications can help reduce cravings and withdrawal and keep them safe as they stay inside.
 - Facilitate prescriptions and prescription deliveries for these medications. For NRT, let them know that the quit line may be able to send them some NRT to get started (866-697-8487 or 866-NY QUITs).
- **Remind the person to minimize close contact with others.**
 - If they are having sex or doing sex work, COVID-19 can be transmitted by close contact like coughing, kissing, or direct contact with bodily fluids.
 - Close contact can be minimized by using condoms during anal, oral or vaginal sex.
 - Review with them or provide the link to the [NYC DOHMH Sex and Coronavirus Disease](#) guidance.
- **If the person is not interested in temporary abstinence.**
 - **Encourage them to have their own supplies to minimize the need for sharing.**
 - ✓ Remind them to not share e-cigs/cigarettes, pipes, bongs or joints, or nasal tubes such as straws.
 - ✓ If they have to share, they can reduce the potential for harm by wiping down the mouthpieces with microbial wipes before sharing or using separate mouthpieces.
 - ✓ Used smoking, snorting, and injecting equipment can be disposed of in a bio-bucket so people know they are used.

- **Advise the person to prepare their drugs themselves.**
 - ✓ Encourage the person to wash their hands thoroughly for 20 seconds with soap and water before preparing their own drugs.
 - ✓ Remind the person to keep their surfaces clean and wipe them down before and after use, with microbial wipes or bleach.
 - ✓ If they can't prepare their own drugs, suggest they stay with the person who is preparing the drugs to follow this same set of steps listed above (e.g., wash their hands, clean surfaces before and after use).
- **Encourage them to limit trips into the community to purchase alcohol and/or drugs.**
- **Help the person plan & prepare for overdose.**
 - ✓ Emergency services might be stretched in a COVID-19 outbreak and slow to respond to 911 calls.
 - ✓ Encourage the person to have naloxone and fentanyl testing strips on hand; help them obtain these if possible.
 - ✓ Let them know, that if they are alone, they should experiment with using less to lower their risk of overdose and go slowly; they should let someone know where they are and that they are using.
 - ✓ If they are using with others, make an overdose plan with them and encourage them to stagger use if possible.
 - ✓ Tell them if 911 needs to be called, 911 will want to know if the person was exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19.

Talk to the Person About Avoiding Returns to Use

- Affirm the person's efforts to abstain from substances.
- Acknowledge that, in this current environment, people may experience increased desire and triggers to use substances.
- Assess person for risk of return to use.
 - Go over relapse prevention plan (write down)
 - Identify triggers and high-risk situations
 - Plan for lapses
 - Plan for reaching out to recovering, safe friend or family members
 - Practice replacing negative thoughts with positive thoughts
 - Teach [loving-kindness meditation](#)
 - List emergency phone numbers

References and Resources

1. <https://harmreduction.org/miscellaneous/covid-19-guidance-for-people-who-use-drugs-and-harm-reduction-programs/>
2. <https://harmreduction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID19-safer-drug-use-1.pdf>
3. <https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus>
4. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/virtual-recovery-resources.pdf>
5. <https://yale.app.box.com/v/COVID19HarmReductionGuidance>
6. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/03/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>

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