**The Impact of COVID -19 on Alcohol Abuse & Recovery**

**By: CLARISSA L. D'AMBRA, LCSW, LCADC**

SPS COMMUNITY OUTREACH COORDINATOR

Licensed Clinical Social Worker #54929

Licensed Clinical Alcohol & Drug Counselor #1954

In April of 2020 the United States and the rest of the world shut down to stay safe from COVID-19. Shelter at home orders were instituted and allowed residents only to conduct essential activities. States relaxed alcohol laws to support businesses and restaurants. Adults were able to order alcohol for curbside pick up and home delivery. Liquor stores in some states were considered essential businesses. The on-line market capitalized on this new demand creating even more access to alcohol. Nielsen reported a 54% increase in national sales of alcohol and a 262% increase of on-line sales during the week ending March 21, 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. (1) These figures illustrate how many individuals turned to alcohol and other substances to cope with the many stressors associated with the pandemic. Research shows that any prolonged exposure to financial and psychological stressors can lead to increased symptoms of substance misuse and dependence.

As part of the population was turning to substances for relief another group was struggling to maintain their recovery from substance use despite the social isolation created by the pandemic. Members of recovery groups including 12-step programs were faced with a new reality of being unable to attend recovery support groups in person. Dr. Nora Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, discusses the unique challenges COVID-19 for people in recovery or seeking recovery support services in her blog. (2) Emotional changes including increased worry, sadness, fear, and loneliness increase the risk of relapse and individuals could not receive peer support and connection as they would have in the past. Dr. Volkow suggests that is spite of these obstacles the recovery community was able to quickly pivot and adapt in this environment to virtual and on-line meeting forums. Although these methods did not fully capture the in-person experience, it allowed individuals to fight against isolation, loneliness, and relapse.

As difficult as the pandemic has been Dr. Volkow feels that the policy changes around facilitating telehealth and expanding access to medications coupled with a new virtual recovery support world has in fact increased access for individuals needing substance use treatment and support. Access has always been a topic of discussion and will continue to be an important consideration for the future. Grossman et al suggests that if we follow the outcomes of others after periods of economic and psychological stress (e.g., natural disasters, epidemics, pandemics, and terrorist attacks) we can expect to see increased rates of alcohol misuse and dependence in two to three years. (4) This reinforces the ever-rising need for treatment services and creative ways to connect with those in need.

September is National Recovery Month and this year’s theme, “Recovery is for Everyone: Every Person, Every Family, Every Community” reminds people in recovery and those who support them, that recovery belongs to all of us. We are all called to end gatekeeping and welcome everyone to recovery by lowering barriers to recovery support, creating inclusive spaces and programs, and broadening our understanding of what recovery means for people with different experiences. (5)

This pandemic has led to many new and uncharted territories for all of us. But to those seeking to obtain or maintain sobriety despite all the obstacles the pandemic has created; these are heroes to be celebrated!

**Virtual Recovery Resources:**

<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/virtual-recovery-resources.pdf>

**References:**

1-

Pollard MS, Tucker JS, Green HD. Changes in Adult Alcohol Use and Consequences During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the US. JAMA Netw Open. 2020;3(9):e2022942. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.22942

2-

NIDA. 2020, September 14. Addressing the Unique Challenges of COVID-19 for People in Recovery . Retrieved from https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/09/addressing-unique-challenges-covid-19-people-in-recovery on 2021, August 23

3-

<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/virtual-recovery-resources.pdf>

4-

Grossman ER, Benjamin-Neelon SE, Sonnenschein S. Alcohol Consumption during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Survey of US Adults. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020;17(24):9189. Published 2020 Dec 9. doi:10.3390/ijerph17249189

5-

<https://rm.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/>