

Staying Sober During COVID-19

Challenges to Recovery During a Pandemic Outbreak



The coronavirus (**COVID-19**) pandemic has affected every aspect of our daily lives. For fire service personnel in recovery from an alcohol or substance use disorder, public restrictions imposed by the current state of emergency can pose unique threats and challenges to an established recovery plan.

To support your continued recovery from addiction during these unprecedented times, be proactive by anticipating challenges and having a plan.

Follow the latest updates and IAFF guidelines on responding to and coping with COVID-19 at www.iaff.org/coronavirus

Changes in Schedule

Having a predictable schedule that supports your physical and mental health is critical to addiction recovery. With a growing number of fire fighters and emergency medical service (EMS) personnel in quarantine or isolation, many cities are struggling to stay fully staffed.

If you're working additional hours to offset crew shortages, you have less time between shifts for important activities that support your recovery. Without time to decompress, connect with family or catch up on hobbies or activities, feelings of physical or emotional depletion may trigger cravings to drink or use.



Cancellation of Recovery Meetings

Due to COVID-19 restrictions on group gatherings, many face-to-face recovery meetings, such as AA, NA and Smart Recovery, have been suspended or moved online. If you struggle with addiction, the social support, structure and accountability provided by in-person meetings is a critical life support. The sudden loss of in-person meetings can be devastating to sobriety.

Disruptions in Treatment

For anyone struggling with addiction and co-occurring mental health issues — consistent, quality healthcare is key. If you participate in outpatient substance abuse group treatment, mental health counseling or medication management, your current treatment schedule may be impacted due to social distancing guidelines and current strains on our healthcare system. Treatment for a mental health or substance use disorder will need to be adapted during this time.

Access to Alcohol

While sporting events, schools and most businesses are closed, liquor stores remain open in many cities. Local officials fear closing liquor stores could cause life-threatening withdrawal symptoms for some, flooding emergency rooms and further straining local healthcare systems. Especially if you are in the earlier weeks or months of sobriety, a steady supply of alcohol combined with isolation and little else to do may be a recipe for relapse.

Family Stress

While your family may be a critical component of your sober support system, too much time with family can be stressful. If you are accustomed to getting off work and coming home to an empty, quiet house in the morning, finding your kids home from school and your spouse juggling work and childcare is a different environment. While stuck at home, your partner may expect you to share the burden of additional childcare or housework. Further, if your relationship or marriage is already strained, large amounts of time spent home together may leave you feeling desperate for a release.

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To learn more, visit www.iaff.org/coronavirus or www.iaff.org/behavioral-health

Coronavirus Blues

As officials battle this public health and economic crisis, many are struggling with a collective sense of grief and loss for their former way of life. Virtually overnight, we have lost the ability to gather with family and friends, participate in outdoor activities and simply move about freely in our communities.

Those impacted by the cancellation of a major milestone celebration, such as a graduation, wedding, anticipated vacation or visiting a newborn baby, may feel a range of emotions, including anger. For anyone in recovery, the profound reduction in movement and social interaction can lead to serious emotional changes that threaten stability and sobriety.

How to Stay in Control

Relapse is not inevitable. If it has already happened, it's not too late to reset. If you are in recovery from drug or alcohol addiction, you probably already know what people, places, things and experiences trigger your cravings to drink or use. While the COVID-19 outbreak presents a range of new challenges, personal awareness is half the battle. Take time today to be proactive, explore your areas of vulnerability and develop a plan you can stick to.

- **If you have a sponsor**, call or video chat with him or her today and express your need for extra support and check-ins during this time.
- **Participate in online recovery meetings** during times you would normally attend in-person meetings.
- **Identify stress-relieving activities** you can do on or off shift that help you disconnect from anxious or negative thoughts. These may include physical activity, a guided meditation app or watching funny videos on your phone.
- **Ask your mental health provider for virtual sessions.** If the office or clinic is closed, now is the time to clarify if your provider can transition to telemental health and use that technology.
- **Secure needed medications.** If you take medication for a mental health or substance use disorder, make sure you have enough to last until your next visit. Call your doctor now to determine how the office will handle refills if they are closed.
- **Establish solo breaks from family.** If you find being home all day with family stressful, find a way to take break while maintaining social distance. A 30-minute walk outside or closing the door with headphones on can go a long way.
- **Communicate needs to your partner.** These are unprecedented times. Do not expect your spouse or partner to know exactly what you need to stay sober right now. Clearly communicate needs, wishes and expectations.
- **Don't forget the basics.** Whether you have been sober one month or one year, the age-old recovery acronym, H.A.L.T., should stay front and center at this time. Anticipate times of the day or week that you are likely to become Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired during this time. Have a plan to cope.
- **Be aware of rationalizations to drink or use.** During these unprecedented times, you may notice attempts to mentally justify or normalize just one drink or dose. For every justification you can think of to drink or use, write down a reason you are committed to recovery. Keep this list accessible in your pocket, at your bedside or on your phone. Review it regularly and read it your spouse, partner or sponsor for accountability.

Find an Online Meeting Today

Online recovery meetings provide critical social support and accountability.

<http://aa-intergroup.org>

<https://virtual-na.org>

<https://www.smartrecovery.org>