

### Helping Ourselves and Each Other

The loss of daily structure has interrupted patterns that many people use to



maintain wellness in their lives; gym routines, exercise schedules, social gatherings, yoga classes, church services, support groups and recovery meetings.

With this interruption, it is important to make an extra effort to practice self-care and support others to do the

same. Trying to adapt to online platforms, schooling our children at home, having less time to ourselves in our homes and missing and worrying about our family members and friends is tough.



If there ever was a time to nurture ourselves, it's now. Our emotional well-being and immune system health is important and we need to protect ourselves. We also need to role model good self-care to those we serve and those we care about.



Community and Connection is vital to all of us, we just need to figure out how to do this in a way that is safe and supportive for all.

For those in recovery from substance use, having a sense of community and connection is vital. With in-person meetings on hold because of COVID-19, virtual support has become important not only to combat the virus but to combat addiction.



Isolation and loneliness can cause all of us stress, and for those in recovery from substance use disorder this is a common foe.



I'm sure we have heard the jokes about **"to many Quarantinis"** and **"the damage the pandemic is doing to people's livers"** but for some this is no **laughing matter**. Less structure in the day is increasing some people's use of substances. This can push an individual's tolerance level increasing their risk for a substance use problem. Being stuck at home can make it more difficult to reduce use and may induce stress for someone working on maintaining abstinence in early recovery. Todd Farchione, a College of Arts & Sciences research associate professor and a member of BU's [Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders](#) (CARD) states, "Going to the office, driving in, having the same responsibilities—these things helped people who struggled with managing their behavior on their own," he says. "But now they don't have that anymore. So it's a bad situation for people with addiction or substance abuse issues. And what's open? Grocery stores and liquor stores." To read more; [Unfortunately, It's a Good Time to Study Anxiety and Drinking](#)

### Vulnerability

Most of us have heard about the increased risks and dangers for individuals who are older and those with chronic health conditions but we don't hear about the increased risk for individuals with substance use problems. These individuals are very vulnerable. This is "because COVID-19 attacks the lungs, and 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

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those drugs' effects on respiratory and pulmonary health" [COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders](#)

"Dr. Nora Volkow, who heads the National Institute on Drug Abuse, is urging people to stop vaping because of the likelihood it will lead to worse outcomes for people with coronavirus, [Kaiser Health News](#) reports. Because the pandemic is so new, there is not enough data to show for certain that vaping increases the risk of worse outcomes, she noted. "We already know for COVID that, with comorbid conditions—particularly those that affect the lungs, the heart, the immune system—[patients] are more likely to have negative outcomes," she said. "One can predict an association. In the meantime, because of the data that already exist, we should be very cautious. The prudent thing is to strongly advise individuals who are vaping to stop." [NIDA Director Urges People to Stop Vaping Because of Coronavirus Risks](#)

There has been some literature stating drinking alcohol will kill the virus. The consumption of Alcohol will not prevent COVID -19, and it will not protect you from being infected.

**Alcohol has effects, both short-term and long-term, on almost every single organ of your body.**

Overall, the evidence suggests that there is no "safe limit" – in fact, the risk of damage to your health increases with each drink of alcohol consumed. **Alcohol use, especially heavy use, weakens the immune system and thus reduces the ability to cope with infectious diseases.** To learn more, review this fact sheet from The World Health Organization: [Alcohol and COVID-19: what you need to know](#)

### CONNECTING

Connecting with others is vital for us and we have been finding ways to do this through Zoom and other platforms. Fitness centers are sending us virtual workouts we can do in our living rooms. We are having social gatherings online and working from home on our computers. Our classes are online. We are having virtual medical and counseling appointments.

Not too long ago, we were concerned about how much time we spent on our devices. In fact if you use an iPhone, your screen time was tracked daily as a way to help you monitor just how much time you were on your devices. Now it is a necessity to functioning in our daily lives.

"Our lives used to be separate – work, friends, family – now these elements are all happening in the same space. The [self-complexity theory](#) posits that individuals have multiple aspects – context-dependent social roles, relationships, activities and goals – and we find the variety healthy, says Petriglieri. When these aspects are reduced, we become more vulnerable to negative feelings"

"Most of our social roles happen in different places, but now the context has collapsed," says Petriglieri. "Imagine if you go to a bar, and in the same bar you talk with your professors, meet your parents or date someone, isn't it weird? That's what we're doing now... We are confined in our own space, in the context of a very anxiety-provoking crisis, and our only space for interaction is a computer window"

To read more: [The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy](#)

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### What to Do

**Remember we all have strengths, and this may be a time to discover your strengths and skills.**

Here's an interesting read from Positive Psychology.com to explore: [Personal Strengths & Weaknesses Defined \(+ List of 92 Personal Strengths\)](#)

Are you a writer? Maybe write someone a note or an old fashioned letter, letting them know how important they have been in your life.



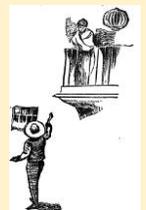
letter,

Are you an artist? Create art work and send it to people.

Do you like to sing? Serenade on face time.

Do you like to talk? Have a regular phone call.

Can you sew? Some people are making masks and sharing them.



Are you a cook or a baker? Drop off some soup or cookies on someone's doorstep?

Are you supportive? Attend support meetings and plan to meet your friends there (virtually)

Do you enjoy Movies and Games? Watch movies and play games together virtually.

Are you a gardener? Start some seeds in egg cartons and leave on a friends steps.



*Kindness is contagious. For more ideas explore this list (keep social distancing in mind):*

[50 Easy Pay it Forward Day Kindness Ideas](#)

### Learn from Others

I recently saw this article and personally know this to be true. When I worked in Oncology as a supportive clinician for those going through treatment, I observed those who were in recovery from substance use were able to access skills learned in recovery to make it through the most difficult of treatments. Here's a great article from RAMS in Recovery at VCU

### **10 Secrets People in Recovery from Addiction Know that Could**

#### **Help Us All Survive this Global Pandemic**

People in recovery can teach us a lot about making it through tough times with strength and dignity. Rams in Recovery and The Well are collaborating to share some recovery wisdom we can borrow as we navigate our new reality.

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### 1. The fight is fixed.

Wait, what? Is it really a central tenet of recovery to just give up and accept that things can't be changed? Well... yes. Many people recovering from addiction must accept that they cannot control their substance use once they start using. This allows them to move forward with a goal of *not using* at all.

We must take a deep breath and accept the reality of COVID-19 before we can navigate it. That we are quarantined, that we have lost a job, that we are anxious about our loved ones. We do this not out of defeat, but so that we can move forward and find ways to reach out to friends, file for unemployment, or challenge those in power to do better.

The Serenity Prayer, common in recovery meetings, says, "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Spiritual or not, we would all do well to live by the spirit of this quote.

### 2. H.A.L.T. if you're Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired.

These four basic states affect life in a big way. They can be particularly challenging in combination. We've all been the "hangry version" of ourselves and it isn't pleasant for anyone. Checking in with yourself using HALT can be good preventative medicine. Do you really need to tell that person what you think? Right now?

These tips are the foundation of self-care. For those in recovery, paying attention to HALT can prevent dips in mood that prompt returns to drug use. For those weathering a pandemic, they'll help us keep it together so that we can be there for our friends and family. You can't pour from an empty cup, so take care of your own needs first.

### 3. Progress, not perfection.

People *will* stumble early in recovery. Not everyone will relapse, but everyone will have emotional outbursts, make poor decisions, and feel overwhelmed at times. Those who succeed are those who keep trying anyway.

If you're in a funk from isolation, it's never too late to pick yourself up — even if that just means doing one small thing at a time to improve your well-being, like drinking a glass of water or calling a friend. Living with the new normal — heck, living in general — is a learning process for all of us, so don't hate on yourself for stumbling a little (or a lot).

### 4. "Serenity is not freedom from the storm but peace amid the storm."

People in recovery must learn to face life head-on without substances to numb them. They learn to exist alongside difficult circumstances instead of running from them. While this brings sorrow, it also creates new capacity for joy.

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No matter how long the current pandemic lasts, life will always have its challenges. Resilience in the face of inevitable hardship will serve us through the current situation and beyond. Check out the [APA's tips on building resilience](#).

#### 5. Keep your head where your feet are.

Those early in recovery often get caught up wondering how they'll make it. Things feel uncertain and they can't imagine going on for years in sobriety. They are encouraged to take things "one day at a time" — to remain in the present and deal with life's difficulties as they arise.

It's easy to worry about "what ifs" or how long the current situation will last. We're healthier and more productive when we bring our minds back to what's happening now. Instead of trying to predict what lies ahead, focus on "doing the next right thing," as is often said in recovery meetings. [Meditation](#) and [other forms of mindfulness](#) can help immensely.

#### 6. Service transforms pain.

Service to others is one of the most important pillars of addiction recovery. It transforms painful experiences into meaningful ones. Members of recovery groups are encouraged to pour their newfound knowledge and energy back into helping others who are struggling— so that the group can keep going, but also so that the individual never loses sight of their own goals.

The pain we are feeling right now is an opportunity to deepen our empathy. We benefit when we reach out to those who are struggling, whether they are experiencing the same problems we are, or facing challenges we've been lucky to avoid. Unsure how to get started during the quarantine? Call up someone you know who might be having a hard time and ask them how they're doing.

#### 7. Gratitude is an action word.

Remembering what we still have and the ways in which we're fortunate can be [a great buffer against hardship](#). Those early in recovery sometimes struggle to break free of the assumption that "everything is awful." Listing things to be grateful for challenges that assumption and encourages perseverance.

Gratitude is an open hearted, feel-good emotion that can supersede fear and prevent catastrophizing. When we are grateful for what we have, it inspires us to pass it on. Want to get started? Write a letter to someone you appreciate. Send it. Try listing out what you are grateful for. The benefits of gratitude accumulate over time, so try making it a regular practice!

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#### 8. It's about surviving, but it's also about thriving.

"We don't get into recovery to drop out of life, we get into recovery to get back into it." While we are certainly focusing on survival in this moment, like many of us did during our early recovery years, we can also be laying the groundwork for a brighter future.

While it is easy to focus on what we cannot do (whether it is drink, or go visit friends), we also have opportunities to strengthen relationships, improve our meditation practices, exercise, and find other things that will set us up to thrive. And we can still focus on the big and small things we have now that make us happy.

#### 9. It's mutual aid, not self-help.

There are many paths to recovery, but we *all* need community. Recovery Dharma, SMART Recovery, Life Ring, Celebrate Recovery, and 12 Step all have community as a central tenet. Addiction, like a pandemic, causes isolation and disconnection. In order to survive and grow, we need each other.

We're all Alone Together and we have to support one another. Stay in contact with friends and loved ones over the phone, video chat, or text. Check in on people you haven't heard from in a while. Talk to someone you trust when you're feeling low. Human beings are social animals! We'll weather this isolation far better if we're... well, not too isolated.

#### 10. Normal is just a setting on the dryer.

Sitting in recovery meetings over many years teaches us there is no such thing as "normal," though many of us have lost years of our lives trying to become it. It is easy to criticize our differences; to believe we are not \_\_\_\_\_ enough. Obsession with normalcy often prevents us from seeing what is beautiful or possible. Many of us find that when we embrace and acknowledge the parts of ourselves we were once ashamed of, we are able to grow.

Provided you're following CDC guidelines, there's no "right" way to do a pandemic. This is a totally new scenario for almost all of us. It's okay to be very anxious, or not anxious at all. It's okay to wear pajamas all day, do yoga at midnight, and eat pancakes for dinner. If you're keeping yourself and others safe and working (at any pace) toward your own wellbeing, you're doing great.

**Be Safe. Be Kind and enjoy your summer!**

*For Comments on this, newsletter or suggestions for future articles please contact: Diane Geyer, LCPC, LADC, CCS, NCC~ Clinician and Coordinator of Clinical Substance Use Services at USM~ 207-780-4050 Email: [diane.geyer@maine.edu](mailto:diane.geyer@maine.edu)*