

The Critical Role of Substance Misuse Prevention During and After COVID-19

As ‘sheltering in place’ becomes the new normal in many areas of the US, millions of people are experiencing isolation, financial insecurity, and unprecedented levels of stress—at a time when physical distancing separates people from the support systems they need most.

Substance misuse prevention practitioners are uniquely positioned to facilitate an effective response to both the short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19.

- **The threat is real.** Individuals who experience trauma are at greater risk of developing substance misuse problems. Substance misuse also increases the risk of related issues like suicide and domestic violence, as well as chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease. For those living with a substance use disorder, this crisis increases the risk of relapse or worsening of illness. Prevention practitioners can help us recognize and address the factors that may contribute to or protect against behavioral health problems.
- **Alcohol rates are on the rise.** Alcohol beverage sales rose by 55% in late March, when many states and public health officials urged residents to stay at home. Prevention practitioners have a proven track record of success implementing strategies to prevent alcohol misuse, particularly among young adults. Since 2004, drinking rates among 13- to 20-year-olds have declined by nearly 33%, due in part to effective prevention initiatives.
- **Staying safe depends on behavior change.** Prevention practitioners understand how difficult it is for people to change behaviors and the importance of implementing behavior change strategies that are well-planned, well-executed, and most likely to produce the greatest benefit.
- **Changing individual behavior is not enough.** What messages are we delivering by deeming liquor stores an “essential business” and allowing restaurants to deliver alcohol as a take-out option? Prevention practitioners understand the need to create environments that support healthy behaviors—such as by implementing local and state policies that reduce alcohol access.
- **Evidence is critical.** In this era of “fake news” and false assumptions, reliance on hard evidence is more important than ever. Prevention practitioners have ready access to the

data planners need to understand the behavioral health problems facing different communities and develop appropriate responses.

- **Health disparities exist.** Already marginalized populations, including people of color and low-income communities, will witness disproportionate disruption to their lives because of COVID-19. They are also less likely to access testing and more likely to contract and die from the virus. Prevention practitioners understand the vital importance of health equity. We can help to ensure that our most vulnerable populations are prioritized in our response and create seamless systems of care that ensure that no one falls through the cracks.
- **Stigma hurts everyone.** Stigma and discrimination can occur when people associate a disease, such as COVID-19, with a population or nationality, even though not everyone in that population or from that region is specifically at risk for the disease. Prevention practitioners understands that words matter, and bring valuable experience creating materials and messaging that are positive, productive, and inclusive.
- **Trauma-informed care must be the norm.** Youth who have experienced trauma are more likely to experience mental health conditions like anxiety, demonstrate difficult behaviors, and have difficulty forming healthy relationships. Prevention practitioners understand the relationship of trauma to mental health and can help professionals respond in trauma-informed ways to youth whose lives have been disrupted by this pandemic.
- **Collaboration and coordination are more important than ever.** COVID-19 requires a coordinated response. Prevention practitioners have experience convening community partners, facilitating group planning, and generate decisions that are practical and well-supported.
- **States project budget shortfalls.** As states grapple with the budgetary and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, state leaders and local officials will have to make difficult decisions about how to allocate resources during the recovery. The National Conference of State Legislatures is tracking projected revenue shortfalls and revised estimates for FY2020 and 2021. Read the full report at [Corona Virus \(COVID-19\) Revised State Revenue Projections](#).

We must work together to mitigate the impact of this pandemic. Make the voice of prevention heard where you live and work.

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