

# Coronavirus and Addiction

The current crisis presents a challenge to some in recovery.

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I sometimes tire of the saying that every challenge is a growth opportunity. But sooner or later, I realize that every challenge I've overcome has been by learning a lesson I hadn't previously known or had allowed myself to forget.

As coronavirus rapidly impinges on our daily routines, demanding this new thing called social distancing and altering habits we had not even been aware of, there are two lessons that can help us meet the challenge. The entire recovering community will benefit from learning the first lesson, and the friends and relatives of addicts might well benefit from paying attention to the second.

First, addiction and co-dependence both lead to, and flourish in, isolation. As alcohol and other drug use overtake a person's life, that life begins to narrow. The substance being used becomes the central organizing principle of one's life. Friends and family who do not share the addiction become irritants, then enemies. Isolation becomes a weapon and a solution—then a prison. Social isolation protects one's secrets and puts Miracle-Gro on addiction.

Recovery for addicts depends on breaking out of social isolation and becoming a member of the recovering community. And now our political leaders and medical scientists are encouraging "social distancing" for personal safety and as the socially responsible action to take. The challenge facing people in recovery from addiction is to find ways to intensify their program of recovery during this challenge and not isolating, even as home meetings are canceled.

The first response to any stress should be to reinforce one's recovery efforts. Today, when meetings of the fellowship carry the danger of spreading coronavirus infection, this has to mean returning to the literature, picking up the phone more regularly to make program calls,

and searching the Internet for online meetings. Some meetings are even setting up Zoom meetings to keep members connected.

Social distancing is necessary, but it does not have to mean isolation. I am reminded of the old saying that only you can choose recovery, but you do not have to recover alone. Only each individual can make the decision to open a piece of literature or to pick up the phone and dial a friend in recovery. Do not allow isolation to creep into your life and separate you from the fellowship.

The friends and family of addicts have an opportunity to observe in their own behavior the difficulty all people have changing deeply ingrained habits. Even without the chemical reward alcohol and other drugs give to continuing their habitual use, other habits are extraordinarily difficult to extinguish.

I refer specifically to the tendency to touch your face. We are strongly advised to avoid raising our hands to rub our eyes, scratch our cheek or nose, or touch our lips. Stop it. Just try to stop it. Giving in to the habit could be a matter of life and death for some. Stop it.

Not so easy, is it? First you have to be aware you are about to touch your face—not just be aware that you have touched your face, because that is already too late. Be aware that you are about to touch your face.

Then abstain from touching. Does the itch worsen and the moisture in the corner of your eye become more irritating? How long can you tolerate the discomfort? It is only a small fraction of the discomfort felt by an addict when they first abstain from using. Feel how difficult this small fraction is. Tolerate it *all* day, though it is best to think about abstaining for only a moment at a time.

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Do you ever scratch your face out of defiance? Or with a “what the hell” attitude that minimizes the potential consequences? Even worse, do you find yourself dabbing your eyes without even being aware you were doing it?

Remember, with humility, how difficult it is to break a habit. This understanding about yourself provides a small window into the struggle facing anyone abstaining from an addictive substance. This may help replace criticism with compassion.

At this moment in our history when we are all called upon to be “first responders” to this crisis, it is important to practice the Twelve Step traditions and concepts that call on us to serve the common welfare by remembering that participation is the key to harmony.

We all need to do our part for the common good, and our part is to take care of our own health.

Social distancing can be undertaken as service. If we do it together, it does not have to be isolating.