

Maintaining mental health isn't easy in a COVID-19 world

By PATTI SINGER

Jon Westfall really needs a group hike.

His recovery depends in large part on being physical — working out and running with friends.

“We haven't done any of that since March 14,” said Westfall, peer support program manager and outreach coordinator, who doubles as the boxing instructor at ROCoverly Fitness.

He's tired of Zoom and the virtual world.

“I need my people in 3-D,” he said. “I'm burned out on 2-D people.”

The first case of COVID-19 in Monroe County surfaced March 11, but the illness caused by the novel coronavirus already was entrenched downstate. A few days later, Monroe County schools closed. By the follow-



Jon Westfall

Photo provided

ing week, Gov. Andrew Cuomo had put New York on PAUSE. While the move was intended to slow the spread of the virus by closing all but essen-

tial businesses and services, the disruption to everyday life had unintended consequences on emotional health.

“What do communities do when you force a quick shutdown with no information of when things are going to open up,” said Jennifer Faringer, director of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence – Rochester Area. “... What do we do when we feel trapped, hopeless, helpless, with an unknown virus attacking our community.”

Alcohol and substance abuse — what Faringer called diseases of de-



Faringer

spair — spiked. Experts in the field of substance abuse said hotlines and peer support lines were jammed with people concerned about relapse as well as first-time callers worried about whether they were developing a problem.

“What's causing you to have that question,” Westfall said. “If you're asking, it needs to be addressed”

Too much time, too little purpose

Opioid overdoses have fluctuated in the first five months of 2020. There were 80 in March and 73 in May. The fewest to date were 61 in April, according to data compiled by law enforcement agencies in Monroe County.

There were seven fatal overdoses in January, 17 in March, and 12 each in April and May.

Monroe County Sheriff's Deputy Mike Favata is head of the county's heroin task force. He visits people who have recovered from an overdose to find out what services they need and to talk about their drug use.

“Quite a few said, ‘I smoked marijuana for quite some time and now I have nothing to do. You took my job away. I'm stuck at home. I have severe anxiety. So this is what I end up doing and I'm terrified,’” he said.

Favata said that mental health was overlooked in the need to develop a

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—Carol Carlson

quick response to the physical health crisis.

“... When you have time to think, when you have your business taken away from you, you don't know what you've been masking.”

Favata said furloughs, layoffs and other drastic changes to daily routines left people adrift. “Most people who battle addiction need a purpose to get off that spiral.” He knew of two people who had recently gotten jobs, only to lose them in the shutdown, who relapsed.

Zooming into happy hour

Working from home put a lot of people into a perpetual weekend.

It also made access to alcohol easier — as did having liquor stores being deemed an essential business.

Drinking was glamorized as people held virtual cocktail parties and the internet was filled with recipes for “quarantinis.”

Joel Yager, director of clinical services at Huther Doyle, understood the irony. The possibility of creating

problems at a time when options for healthier activities are limited;

the potential for someone to go through withdrawal without treatment, which could be fatal.

“One epidemic doesn't go away because we've started another,” he said.

Yager said because most people have been exposed to some type of trauma in their life, there's an alcoholic within everyone. “Sometimes it never surfaces.”

Yager said he received calls from spouses who may not have been aware of their partner's drinking because they were gone all day. With both of them home, use is more noticeable.

Yager said the alcohol may take the place of other coping mechanisms.

Keeping your distance

The mandate to stay at least six

feet from others was called social distancing, but that may have been a poor choice of words. Dr. Michael Mendoza, commissioner of the Monroe County Department of Public Health, has said he prefers “physical distancing” because humans need social contact. The connotation of “social” distancing may wear on people's emotional health.

In fact, people in the substance abuse field says the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety. It's connection.

For people used to being around others at work, the sudden solitude can be oppressive.

“They can't talk through their issues,” Yager said. “There's no more water cooler therapy. No going to the beauty shop therapy. No tattoo artist therapy. Everything that was a social outlet before is stopped.”

Paradoxically, the reopening of businesses may not end substance use triggered by COVID.

People for whom isolation has re-

inforced avoidant tendencies will have to go back into the world, said Carol Carlson, licensed mental health counselor and clinical administrator with the

Mental Health Association.

On the other side are people

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who've kept themselves together but now feel they just have to let things out.

She said relying on substances to get relief isn't the shortcut that people may think.

“You don't learn that you can tolerate stress and you can tolerate your worries and work through it,” she said. “You just learn the quick fix. So you cheat yourself from learning that you're strong enough to handle it.”

Checking yourself

As you ask yourself — or a loved one — if substances are becoming a problem, here are some other questions to consider:

What are your creative outlets?
What activities fill your time?
Are you calling friends?
Can you get together with others

and maintain a physical distance while enjoying a social connection?

Have you kept your routine of when you shower, when you go to bed and when you get up and get dressed for the day?

Resources

To get information or ask questions about substance use and emotional health during COVID-19:

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence – Rochester Area. (585) 426-8000, www.depaul.org/ncadd-ra/ or on Facebook.

ROCoverly Fitness. (585) 484-0234 or <https://www.rocoveryfitness.org/>

Mental Health Association (585) 325-3145 or <https://www.mha-rochester.org/>

New York state COVID-19 Resources. <https://omh.ny.gov/omhweb/covid-19-resources.html>

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