



**National Behavioral
Health Network**

for Tobacco & Cancer Control

from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR
MENTAL WELLBEING

Tobacco Cessation for Individuals with Mental Health and Substance Use Challenges during COVID-19:

A Resource Guide





Overview: Trends in Mental Health and Commercial Tobacco Use During COVID-19

Individuals with mental health and substance use challenges (MH/SU) are at higher risk for tobacco use due to disparities created by predatory marketing by the tobacco industry, limited access to high quality of care and high rates of trauma that increase the likelihood of engaging in smoking (Prochaska et al., 2017; Apollonio & Malone, 2005; Budenz & Klein, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the number of individuals with MH/SU challenges, with 54% of adults reporting that the pandemic had an overall negative impact on their mental wellbeing (UPenn, 2020). Individual and community stress responses to a disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic are a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Wide-reaching impact on mental wellbeing occurred due to unique circumstances of the pandemic including economic downturns, social isolation, closures of universities and loss of income, all of which contribute to poor mental health and increased substance use.

Research demonstrates that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted essential workers and members of marginalized communities who are experiencing greater mental health challenges than non-essential workers and non-marginalized communities (Panchal et al., 2021). Older adults are more vulnerable to severe illness from coronavirus and have experienced increased levels of anxiety and depression during the pandemic (Panchal et al., 2021).



Prior to the pandemic, **ONE IN 10** adults reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression.



Today, more than **ONE IN FIVE** adults report symptoms of anxiety and/or depression.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many challenges, including increased stress. Prolonged stress can result in toxic stress, defined as the **extreme, frequent or extended activation of the body's stress response system**, and can impact the brain's structure and function (SAMHSA, 2014).

Without adequate support, maladaptive coping skills such as tobacco use are more likely to occur and can impact an individual from a young age well into adulthood. Mental distress during, and as a result of, the pandemic is occurring against a backdrop of high rates of mental illness and substance use that existed prior to the current crisis. Health care systems, including the mental health care system, have been taxed by the burden of the pandemic impacting quality of care and equitable access. There is a window of opportunity for providers and public health professionals to utilize integrated care approaches to promote better health outcomes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Integrating Tobacco Cessation into Mental Health and Substance Use Treatment



More than two-thirds of people experiencing a mental health challenge as a result of COVID-19 rely on tobacco and nicotine as a coping mechanism (Isasi et al., 2021).

Smoking commercial combustible cigarettes compromises the immune system and damages lungs leading to increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (ALA, 2021). Fortunately, many people are increasing their efforts to quit tobacco use in an effort to avoid severe COVID-19 symptoms. During the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cited smoking as a significant risk factor for severe COVID-19 complications. Smoking tobacco doubles an individual's risk of developing respiratory infections and the risk of getting sicker from COVID-19 (Tong, 2022). The link between tobacco and COVID-19 has gained significant attention from the media and public health stakeholders.

As a result, there is a unique opportunity for individuals to quit smoking and protect their lung health in the face of this lung-impacting virus. Public health professionals and mental health and substance use treatment organizations have the opportunity to protect themselves and their clients from severe COVID-19-related illness by integrating tobacco screening, tobacco-free policies and tobacco cessation treatment services into their existing care models. Integrating tobacco cessation services can help to reduce the risk of severe COVID-19 illness and enhance health outcomes.





Supporting Tobacco Cessation

Reduce the risk of severe COVID-19 illness and promote better long-term health outcomes using these key resources to support tobacco cessation.

Mental Health and Substance Use Treatment Organizations:

Utilize low burden strategies to connect clients to readily available and accessible resources:

[North American Quitline Consortium \(NAQC\) Quitline Map](#)

State quitlines are effective, evidence-based treatments for smoking cessation.

[SmokefreeTXT](#)

The National Cancer Institute provides a free and effective national text-based support service to aid adult cessation.

Integrate evidence-based practices in care models/workflows:

[Screening Brief Intervention Referral Treatment \(SBIRT\)](#)

SBIRT is a comprehensive, integrated public health approach to delivery of early intervention and treatment services for individuals with MH/SU challenges. Evidence indicates that SBIRT can prompt quit attempts.

[Motivational Interviewing \(MI\)](#)

Motivational interviewing is a type of counseling that can be utilized with the Stages of Change model to help people quit tobacco use. It is widely known as a best practice for individuals with MH/SU challenges who use tobacco (Miller et al., 2012).

Take your organization tobacco-free to reduce the overall risk of spreading COVID-19 among clients and staff:

[Taking Your Facility Tobacco-free: A Brief Overview](#)

Change is best implemented through step-by-step processes. Utilize this resource to gain high-level understanding of the steps organizations need to take to successfully address tobacco use in mental health and substance use treatment organizations. Includes success stories from New York, Texas and Pennsylvania.

[Taking Mental Health and Substance Use Organizations Tobacco-free: Resource List](#)

Implementing policy change is an effective way to change the culture around tobacco use and promote recovery-oriented, holistic health for improved success. This resource includes sample implementation plans and tobacco-free policies for change initiatives and research articles and toolkits to demonstrate the case for a tobacco-free campus.



Public Health Professionals:

Utilize COVID-19 in key public health messaging. The adverse health effects of smoking are well-documented and undeniable. Clearly define the risk that smoking poses.

Quitting tobacco use can help protect an individual from severe COVID-19 illness while protecting against other respiratory diseases and cancers.

Encourage individuals with mental health and substance use challenges to quit by communicating that smoking increases the severity of illness among COVID-19 patients.

Check out the [I-COVID-Quit Campaign](#) for examples of COVID-19-related messaging in tobacco cessation.

Incorporate considerations around COVID-19 into statewide tobacco control plans

Work with partner agencies to develop and integrate COVID-19-related language into your tobacco control plan.





Additional COVID-19-related Resources for Tobacco Cessation

Tobacco Cessation Telehealth Guide

- » This guide, provided by the American Academy of Family Physicians, includes information about telehealth care for tobacco cessation including insurance and billing code information. The guide outlines the ASK and ACT strategies which help identify use by asking and identifying a client's interest in quitting by acting. This guide is useful for providers to engage clients in tobacco and/or nicotine cessation.

An Analysis of Inpatient Tobacco Use Treatment Transition to Telehealth

- » Provided by Oxford Academic, this research article analyzes the outcomes of telehealth counseling after receiving in person counseling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concludes that larger client reach and counseling services were identified within the telehealth population.

Supporting Telehealth Technology-assisted Services for People Who Use Drugs: A Resource Guide

- » This resource assists substance use disorder (SUD) treatment providers in implementing telehealth and technology to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals with mental health/substance use disorders. The guide helps providers gain knowledge, access and ensure sustainability for telehealth and technology-assisted services.

Mental Health and COVID-19: Early Evidence of the Pandemic's Impact: Scientific Brief

- » From the World Health Organization, this brief includes systematic reviews of the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence of individuals with MH/SUD and their risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19.

iCovidQuit

- » The iCovidQuit campaign offers resources to aid individuals who use tobacco in cessation during the pandemic and recognizes that smoking increases their risk of severe COVID-19 related illness. Providers can order quit cards to use with clients.

COVID-19 and Tobacco

- » This resource from the American Lung Association provides language that can be used when explaining how smoking and tobacco use can increase chances of having a severe COVID-19-related illness.

Mental Health and COVID-19

- » Mental Health America provides data on how the nation's mental health has changed during the past two years of the pandemic. Key findings among different priority populations are also included.



Million Hearts Change Packages and Action Guides

- » A guide series from the CDC for providers and public health professionals includes evidence-based strategies for improving cardiovascular health. Guides include Hypertension Control Change, Tobacco Cessation Change, Identifying and Treating Patients Who Use Tobacco and more.

Motivational Interviewing and Tobacco Cessation

- » Motivational interviewing is a great tool to use with patients engaging in tobacco cessation. This document provides a background on the tool, steps for utilization and examples of successful motivational interviews.

Rx for Change Training Program

- » From the University of California, San Francisco, this training equips clinicians with evidence-based tools to help their clients succeed in tobacco cessation. All forms of tobacco are addressed and the counseling is focused on all patients, regardless of their readiness to quit. Many different versions of the training are available.

Practice Tools to Address Tobacco Use and Secondhand Smoke Exposure

- » This site from the American Academy of Pediatrics provides many practice tools for treating tobacco substance use disorder and secondhand smoke exposure, including how to initiate conversations with clients in a multiple disciplinary office setting.

COVID-19: How to Help Tobacco Users Quit and Stay Quit when Stress Skyrockets

- » This tip sheet from the Truth Initiative emphasizes how quitting tobacco use can reduce stress and that tobacco use disorder increases anxiety despite the myth that tobacco can be a relaxation method. As the pandemic raises national stress levels, quitting tobacco use is more important than ever.

Clinician Cessation Tools

- » From the CDC, this is a comprehensive resource list to assist clients engage in tobacco cessation. There are also resources listed that can aid in making tobacco control and care as part of standard provider practice.





Citations

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