

Supporting Clients During COVID-19

Tips for Alcohol and Drug Workers

Introduction

In the current climate of change, uncertainty and apprehension about the future, many of our clients will be struggling with difficulties associated with COVID-19 and with the secondary consequences that are occurring both now and in the coming weeks.

How those who have experienced complex trauma and other traumatic events may be affected

Many of our clients have experienced complex trauma and/or other traumatic events and may have a compromised stress response system that can make it more difficult for them to cope in times of heightened stress. These clients may find they are either stuck in a state of persistent hyperarousal or are disconnected, numb and hypo-aroused with limited capacity to regulate themselves. They also may be more sensitive to stress than others and more susceptible to perceiving threat. These difficulties are further complicated by having limited adaptive coping strategies and a reliance on maladaptive avoidant forms of coping such as substance use, distraction and attempts to block out difficult feelings – these strategies will be used heavily at this time.

Some clients may be in denial and may still engage in high risk behaviours and have a limited concept of self care. They may be sensitive to the imposition of rules and authority and may resist complying with restrictions.

Overall, it is likely that the COVID-19 virus will have a serious impact on the wellbeing of our clients and they will have limited access to supports and resources. This is further complicated by their lack of connection to their emotions, needs and ways to care and regulate themselves adaptively. The more we can be investigating what's going on for them (on both a material and emotional level) and working with them to make sense of how they are affected and what will help them to cope, the better.

These are some specific areas of difficulty clients may face and some suggestions that might be helpful in how you can respond:

1. Fear of getting sick

For those clients who have negative self beliefs associated with being powerless, vulnerable and unsafe, the threat of catching COVID-19 may be significant.

- *Inquire about concerns and identify any distorted information they have obtained that may be escalating their fears.*
- *Explore how they are engaging with social media and other news – persistent checking of news about COVID 19 is going to elevate their perception of threat and fear of catching the virus. The combination of exposure to constant threat stimuli with the inability to respond can lead to strong feelings of powerlessness and clients may experience difficulties such as strong anxiety, panic attacks and sleep disturbance.*
- *Encourage reduction of exposure to social media and news pertaining to the virus. This could take the form of having a scheduled time each day to check news. Blocking certain news feeds in Facebook or using other*

2. Fear of the future

The economic consequences are confronting for all of us and many of our clients may have lost employment and be worried about how they will manage in the future. For clients who have limited agency in their life and an external locus of control, this may trigger feelings of being persecuted or powerless.

- *The inability to have any control over what's happening is a key part of the distress people are feeling. Try to connect clients with action – what they can have a sense of control over. Reframe the situation in a way that can help them to feel empowered and look at what they **can** do in these changed circumstances. Some ideas could be a project at home or an online course.*

3. Coping with change and loss

While we rely on work for income, it also can provide routine, structure, identity, purpose, a sense of achievement and self worth, and connection with others. Clients who have lost employment will be dealing with issues of loss on a number of levels.

- *Issues pertaining to loss of identity can trigger feelings of shame and worthlessness for some clients. This may be a time that clients could benefit from exploring their values and what gives them meaning in their life. Self-compassion can also be a powerful antidote to these feelings. You can encourage and model this by validating their feelings, showing kindness and care for the parts of them that feel unworthy and letting them know that it's not their fault.*
- *The lack of structure and routine can have a detrimental effect on clients' wellbeing and exacerbate rumination on loss and hopelessness for future. Encourage clients to develop a routine for everyday life so they can maintain activities, attend to daily tasks and self-care.*
- *Inquire about activities that might promote self worth and wellbeing such as volunteering, checking on friends and neighbours, and contributing in ways that help others.*

4. Social distancing

This can be a very isolating time for our clients. Some clients may also perceive others who are careful about physical contact as rejecting, excluding and uncaring.

- *Remind clients that even though it may feel this way, these are the guidelines that everyone is advised to follow. You could encourage reflection on others' fears about getting unwell and what might be going on for other people (these clients may have limited capacity for mentalisation and it may be difficult to understand the motivations for others' behaviour).*
- *It can be helpful to emphasise that it is **physical** distancing that is being advised and that it is more important than ever to maintain social contacts and to try to have regular check-ins with family and friends. Explore ways they could remain connected to others through phone, video calls, forums, etc.*

5. Self isolation

Many people will be confined to spaces with others that they may struggle to get along with. For those people with complex trauma, interpersonal relationships can already be very triggering and challenging to manage – these difficulties are likely to intensify. Some people may be forced to move home with their parents or family due to financial reasons and this may also be very triggering if they have a history of strained relationships within the family.

- *Explore ways that communication occurs in the household and identify any areas that could contribute to problems. It may be helpful to discuss assertive communication strategies so they can communicate their needs effectively and have ways to manage in times of conflict. Emphasise the importance of prevention and trying to discuss potential problems early and look for ways to reduce the likelihood of difficulties.*
- *It might be good to discuss boundaries and ways that clients can have a sense of a space that they can feel safe in (both physically and emotionally).*
- *Identify potential triggers with clients and plan how they can respond and manage (e.g. a critical father who is likely to activate feelings of being judged or dismissed). Early identification can assist in recognising these triggers and facilitate use of adaptive coping.*
- *Clients who are parents may be under additional stress with less access to support and more time with children at home. Clients with limited coping and parenting skills will be struggling to manage. Encourage parents to take time out when angry and overwhelmed and make opportunities to have space to relax away from children from time to time. This could be an opportunity to learn more about parenting skills (e.g. Triple P online is free for Queenslanders).*
- *There may be clients in family violence situations who are at higher risk of abuse and danger. The combination of prolonged confinement, financial stress, generalised stress associated with the virus, lack of control, lack of opportunity to leave and seek out safety, and the stress of having children at home make this a high-risk time for these clients. Safety planning and connection with supports are important at this time.*

6. General Tips

Provide clients with psycho-education regarding problematic alcohol use during this time.

- While it's understandable that boredom, stress and anxiety may lead to an increased urge to drink, they will likely feel much worse later (e.g. rebound anxiety, disrupted sleep, agitation, low mood).
- Drinking alone (rather than in social situations) may increase use.
- Alcohol will lower their immune response and make them more susceptible to catching the virus.
- It may lead to problems with others in their household (e.g. more arguments).

Clients' use of other substances may increase as well without normal restrictions such as work.

- Encourage clients to self impose boundaries around use (e.g. limiting amounts and times of consumption).

Managing our own stress

At this time of heightened stress (both personally and in the workplace), what can we do to reduce our stress?

- Consider ways that staff can come together to talk about concerns, experiences and share what they are feeling.
- The quality of our relationships is important (e.g. reflect on how can we communicate around difficulties, look at what really matters at this time and what things we can let go, notice how our colleagues are coping and if they need support, be more tolerant and understanding of each other in these times of confusion and uncertainty).
- Recognise our own strong emotions (e.g. anger, frustration, anxiety, grief, sadness) and stay connected with what we are feeling and how we can respond to our needs effectively.
- Have a more deliberate intention to engage in strategies/activities that help you to slow down, settle and soothe yourself (e.g. grounding, breathing, self compassion, physical exercise).

What's helpful for all of us

Connecting with positive emotions and experiences is especially beneficial at this time (e.g. doing something fun with the family or housemates, writing a gratitude journal). This is a time that requires specific effort and intention to attend to self care and to engage in strategies to soothe and regulate ourselves.

Helpful resources and support

Tip sheets and online resources

- Australian Psychological Society (APS): [Tips for coping with coronavirus anxiety](#)
- Beyond Blue: [Looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)
- WHO: [Mental health and psychosocial considerations during COVID-19 outbreak](#)
- Ted article: ["I'm incredibly anxious about coronavirus"](#)
- Study Melbourne: [resources and support for international students affected by COVID-19](#)
- Dr Russ Harris, author of The Happiness Trap: [How to respond effectively to the coronavirus](#)

This resource was developed by Metro North Mental Health - Alcohol and Drug Service, MNHHS.

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