

Managing Substance Use During the COVID-19 Outbreak
Charlotte Buelow charlottebuelow.com/portfolio

This is a scary time for all of us. Every day seems to bring a bleaker outlook with rising numbers of confirmed cases of COVID-19, more deaths, and more restrictions on our everyday lives. While experts promise us this will end, they also caution us that things will grow worse before they get better.

It is normal for us to feel increased anxiety, depression, and a complete lack of control right now. If you are home with your family during this time, you're going to push each other. If you still have to go to work, you are going to feel the increased worry about what you may be exposed to. Facing these situations without knowing just when they will go back to normal, or wondering if they will truly return to normal, only makes our stress edge higher.

We don't like what we can't control. We don't like feeling as though we don't have all of the information available to us. And we certainly don't like having the government restrict our activities. For someone struggling with substance use disorder, this is the perfect storm. The feelings of having no control, an increase in downtime, and a less structured day can contribute to a need to self-medicate and the comfort of finding an escape.

So what can you do to prevent that from happening? There are quite a few things, and having them in place before you need them will make it much easier.

1. Get outside a couple of times a day.

It's finally Spring, despite the frost that I saw outside this morning. Even in times of social distancing, you can take your dog for a walk around the block. Don't feel like walking? Take a book outside and read on your porch.

Breathing in the fresh air will help reduce your feelings of anxiety and depression and will rejuvenate you a bit.

In the coming days, we will likely be spending more time inside our homes than we usually do. Even the largest of

houses will begin to feel small. Stepping outside will give you some space, give you a different view, and allow you some time alone.

2. Develop a new routine.

The restrictions we are under due to the outbreak have hands-down changed what we do and how we do it, and chances are we will face more changes in the near future. Routines make us feel safe and they help keep us moving forward during the day. A lot of us are feeling like we are floating around with no real direction right now because our routines are gone.

So make a new one! Write out a schedule for yourself — begin and end your day at the same time each day, schedule a time to take a shower, do small chores, or anything else you can do each day. Sticking to your routine will give you a feeling of accomplishment and some control back to your day.

3. Limit your intake of news, especially from social media.

It's hard. We feel like we are in the dark and we want to be informed, so we tend to inundate ourselves with all of the information out there. There is so much out there right now: opinions, accounts of what has occurred in other countries, news from unreliable sources, and news from reliable sources. But the truth is, you can read everything out there and the virus is still here. Your brain is just overwhelmed and instead of feeling more informed, you feel drained, depressed, and hopeless.

Stick to news from reliable sources and walk the line between being informed and being obsessed. The President gives a daily press conference and most state governors are doing the same, these are reliable outlets that cover the important elements: what is happening in the nation, what is happening in your state, what the trends are showing, and what we might expect in the coming days.

4. Exercise

The benefits exercise can bring to our physical health are well known: weight-loss, improved heart health, and more.

But did you know exercise is just as beneficial to our mental health? Exercising every day can boost your mood, lower your anxiety, and provide you with a healthy escape.

Even better, exercise during a moment of stress, when the urge to use substances hits, or when you are headed towards a destructive behavior, can help pull your energy to something more productive and get you through that moment.

5. Focus on what you *can* control.

Undoubtedly there is a lot we cannot control right now. Take some time to list the things you *can* control during this time. We *cannot* control how others are following the CDC recommendations, but we *can* control how we wash our hands and practice social distancing. We *cannot* control friends who post their opinions on social media about what is happening. We *can* control where we get our facts from and choose only reliable sources.

You can also control your own triggers and how you respond to them. Use this time to develop an awareness of what triggers you — other people, situations, fear, anxiety, etc. Ask yourself how you typically respond to these triggers and decide if that response is healthy or unhealthy. If it is unhealthy, think of a healthier alternative to replace it with. It will take work to make a healthier response become automatic, but we have that time right now to work on it.

The days ahead are new territory for us all. We are truly living through a historical moment and it is up to us to decide if we are going to look back at this time and say, “I worked hard to get through it and came out stronger” or, “I gave up and got set back a bit.” Both are ok, but the decision is yours.