

Supporting Clinicians Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tip Sheet: Physicians Suffering from Silent SUD – Spouse Recognition



This tip sheet offers suggestions for protecting the doctor during the COVID-19 pandemic who may be at risk or is engaging in substance use (SU) as a stress reliever. We also provide valuable information for spouses and families to help recognize substance use disorder (SUD) in their physician family member. Lastly, we provide tips on interventions to help initiate plans for entering treatment programs.

What is a substance use disorder (SUD)?

- Inappropriate use of a substances as a stress reliever or mechanism to help cope. All individuals are vulnerable to substance use.
- American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) definition: *A state of adaptation that is manifested by a drug class specific withdrawal syndrome that can be produced by abrupt cessation, rapid dose reduction, decreasing blood level of the drug, and/or administration of an antagonist.*
- DSM-V criteria:
 1. Taking the substance in larger amounts or for longer than you meant to
 2. Wanting to cut down or stop using the substance but not managing to
 3. Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from use of the substance
 4. Cravings and urges to use the substance
 5. Not managing to do what you should at work, home, or school, because of substance use
 6. Continuing to use even when it causes problems in relationships
 7. Giving up important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of substance use
 8. Using substances again and again even when it puts you in danger
 9. Continuing to use even when you know you have a physical or psychological problem that could have been caused or made worse by the substance
 10. Needing more of the substance to get the effect you want (tolerance)
 11. Development of withdrawal symptoms, which can be relieved by taking more of the substance



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What are Substances of Abuse?

- Alcohol
- Controlled substances with actual medicinal uses – opioids, benzodiazepines, stimulants, amphetamines, etc.
- Street drugs – cocaine, LSD, others.



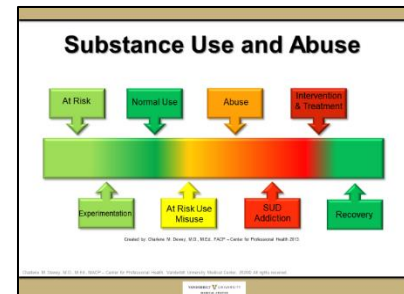
What are Process Addictions?

- Gambling
- Pornography
- Gaming
- Internet
- Shopping (live or online)
- Sex/Love/Relationship
- Exercising
- Working



Triggers for a SUD:

- Stress of COVID – loss of control, excess work, fear of lack of PPE, fear of dying from COVID, financial stresses if there is loss in revenue or if furloughed, lack of ability to provide for family, etc.
- Feelings of isolation
- Significant losses – deaths, lack of control during the pandemic
- Anger and stress at home and work
- Loss of balance in work-life demands – reduced sleep, working longer hours, overeating, lack of exercise, less prayer, etc.
- Genetic links – physicians with a family history of addiction is at higher risk of developing addictions
- Trauma - A high Adverse Child Event (ACE) score or other types of trauma including trauma related to work
- Iatrogenic – medications started by a physician for appropriate reasons but who failed to discontinue medicine in an appropriate time after treatment is complete



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Warning Signs – What to look for

- Isolated substance use – alcohol or pain pills or other street drugs
- Finding alcohol or pills in different hidden locations
- Increasing use of a substance
- Secret internet use
- Feeling of numbness or hopelessness or listlessness
- Not enjoying moments or experiencing joy with those they love
- Personality changes – Jekyll and Hyde
- Social isolation
- Staying at the office later than partners
- Unexplained expenses



When to Reach Out for Help?

- Interference in family relationships
- Interference in work responsibilities
- Intoxicated behaviors – fights, arguments, etc.
- Consequences of substance use: DUI, job loss, etc.
- When the physician cannot be honest with him/herself about the severity of their use
- Physicians unable to quit or reduce use or limit use
 - Safe use for alcohol and medicinal controlled substances are limited to a level that prevents misuse. Safe alcohol levels include:
 - For male physicians: Less than 4 standard drinks within a day or 14 in a week
 - For female physicians: Less than 3 standard drinks in a day or 7 in a week
 - Consumption higher than this represents tolerance and unsafe use levels
 - For controlled substances such as opioid pain pills – a maximum morphine mg equivalent of 50 mg or more is a sign of tolerance, rapid metabolizing or misuse (e.g.: 10 mg of hydrocodone or oxycodone more than 4 times a day)

What an Intervention Looks Like:

- Family can call the medical board – anonymously or not – but this can hurt the licensee/physician.
- Call the Tennessee Medical Foundation (TMF) Physician Health Program (615-467-6411). The Tennessee Medical Foundation is an advocate for the Physician and his/her health and thus is an excellent resource. See resources below for full contact information.



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- Out of state – call each state’s physician health program. Some state PHPs have a required board reporting structure, and they do vary in services. Learn more on each state’s web page. Use the Federation of State Physician Health Programs in the resources section below to determine your state’s program structure and services.
- Don’t try and do this on your own.
- Let the experts help you and absolve you of the task of ‘fixing’ your loved one – this is what they do and do well.
- The family can support and offer love.
- Family members/Spouses should consider Al-Anon for any 12-step program.
- Sexual addictions are often the most challenging experience for spouses. If you are a spouse of a physician with a sexual addiction, please consider that you will need more support from a skills-based therapist. A Certified Sex Addiction Therapist (CSAT) therapist can be very helpful. There are several programs in Nashville including Bethesda Workshops. Use [Psychology Today](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/sexual-addiction/tn/nashville) to find a CSAT near you.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/sexual-addiction/tn/nashville>

What resources Exist for Physicians with past or present SUD?

- There are ways for physicians and other healthcare providers to gain trusted and dependable information and treatment.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone needs to know they have options!
- No one wants to end a career on a low note, so don’t let the stress get to you before it is too late – reach out for help!
- There are many caring and supportive individuals who are willing to help and who have dedicated their careers to helping physicians.
- See the resource list below.

What is Concerning for Physicians Coming out of Treatment?

- Those who go through the motions but don’t engage in the recover process.
- Those without good spiritual connections and question everything about recovery meetings.
- Those who haven’t surrendered and still think they can do it on their own.
- Early in the treatment/recovery process – these physicians may be at higher risk for relapsing

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What's a Twelve Step Program?

- A process of healing and recovery from addictions
- Consists of peer-based support groups
- The only requirement is the desire to stop
- Follow the twelve steps and the twelve traditions
- Meetings are free to anyone and available across the country/world
- Materials available on the web for free
- Has a spiritual and agnostic approach
- Started by a physician who cared for an alcoholic in 1939 (over eight decades ago)
- Has a group for spouses – Al Anon
- Family and spouses should read the brochure titled: *Is there an Alcoholic in Your Life? A.A.'s Message of Hope*
- Has specific physician groups called caducous meetings
- *Alcoholics Anonymous is a nonprofit, self-supporting, entirely independent fellowship—"not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution." "It is nonprofessional, self-supporting, multiracial, apolitical, and available almost everywhere. There are no age or education requirements." ~ AA.org*

What to expect if treated?

- Many are reluctant to enter treatment or don't realize they need treatment; however, once someone is treated and in recovery, they look back and are thankful for their intervention. Many return to their wonderful selves with time and support.
- Gratitude
- Appreciation
- Honesty with themselves
- Loss of anger
- Ability to surrender



What's needed?

- Advocates for physicians
- Communicating the need for reduced stigma around SUD in healthcare providers
- A safe place for connection and discussion

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Resources: MH specialists, coaches, psychiatry, primary doctor, etc. Each picture is hyperlinked to the actual webpage. Simply click on the picture.

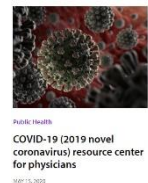
- American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/> - click on *psychological help center*, then *find a psychologist*.
- International Coaching Federation: <https://coachfederation.org/> - click on *find a coach*.
- American Psychiatric Association: <https://www.psychiatry.org/> - click on *Patient/Families* then click *find a psychiatrist*.
- The American College of Physicians – COVID-19 Resources for physicians. <https://www.acponline.org/>
- The American Medical Association – resources for Physicians. <https://www.ama-assn.org/>
- The National Academy of Medicine – Well-being resources. <https://nam.edu/initiatives/clinician-resilience-and-well-being/clinician-well-being-resources-during-covid-19/>
- TN Medical Foundation – Physicians Health Program: <https://e-tmf.org/>
- Federation of State Physician Health Programs: <https://www.fsphp.org/>

Resources

- Find a Psychologist
- Order Free Brochures
- Request a Speaker

Find a Coach

PATIENTS & FAMILIES



Federation of State Physician Health Programs

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- Narcotics Anonymous: <https://www.na.org/>



- Al-Anon: <https://al-anon.org/>



- Sexaholics Anonymous: <https://www.sa.org/>



- Gambler's Anonymous:
<http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/ga/locations>



- Caduceus Meetings – specific meetings for healthcare providers

TN Physicians: (copied from TMF webpage – accessed June 4, 2020)

Tennessee Medical Foundation (<https://www.fsphp.org/tennessee>)

Telephone: (615) 467-6411

Fax: (615) 467-6419

Email: michaelb@e-tmf.org

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Program Structure

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Contact us at: cph@vumc.org or 615-936-0678

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The program is operated by: Independent corporation – 501(c)3

Do you have a formal contractual relationship with the state medical board? Yes

Program Services

Types of disease, illness, or conditions monitored:

- Substance use disorders
- Mental health
- Behavioral health problems
- Physical illness
- Malpractice litigation
- Stress management
- Other: Overprescribing

Services provided to which populations:

- Physicians - MD
- Physicians - DO
- Families of physicians
- Medical students
- Residents
- Podiatrists
- Veterinarians
- Chiropractors
 - Optometrists
 - Physician Assistants
- X-Ray Operators

Funding

Please indicate the primary sources of funding for your program:

- State medical society
- Malpractice insurance companies
- Hospital and private contributions
- Other: Voluntary contributions