

Persons with substance abuse disorders and other addictions: Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

Justo Reinaldo Fabelo-Roche

University of Medical Sciences of Havana, Cuba

Cuba implemented policies mandating social distancing on March 11, 2020, which were still in place at the time of this study. During such periods of isolation, people with psychoactive substance-related disorders and other addictions may be tempted to reduce tension, stress, uncertainty and possible distress by increasing the use of substances or practices they have abused. This can mean relapses and setbacks for patients undergoing treatment. A multidisciplinary team of health professionals specializing in addiction at the Center for Academic Development in Drug Addiction, in Havana, Cuba, cares for people with these disorders and followed their evolution during the initial period of COVID-19 social isolation.

With the aim of characterizing strategies employed by patients undergoing treatment for substance abuse and addictions, we conducted a qualitative study from April 2020 through May 2020, using a convenience sample of 37 patients (all students) who had been progressing towards recovery from addictive behaviors when face-to-face encounters were suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions. Contact was maintained through information and communication technologies. The research used telepsychology and focused on understanding patient life experiences. Patients were interviewed using a semi-structured survey, which was then transcribed and coded thematically using a grounded-theory approach.

We found that patients' ability to cope successfully with challenges presented by COVID-19 was mediated by: 1) the individual's own methods for maintaining self-control (commitment to studies, projects, and work with therapists) that aided them in their goals concerning abstinence; 2) difficulties faced in addressing specific events and situations (doubts, uncertainties, disagreements, isolation and time use); 3) perpetuation and revivification of myths related to substances and addictive activities (exacerbation of supposed benefits of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, overuse of social networks); and 4) tendencies toward irrationality and lack of emotional control (fear, sadness, anger, constant worry and self-imposed demands).

Our findings suggest that despite the potential negative psychological impact of preventive social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, individual coping mechanisms developed by these patients, aiming at improved self-control, allowed most to avoid setbacks that could have affected their recovery. Nevertheless, patients faced challenges to their recovery that were compounded by difficulties in specific situations, myths related to substances and addictive activities, and tendencies toward irrationality or lack of emotional control.