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Treating mental health and substance use disorder patients during the COVID-19 pandemic

Patients who are suffering from a substance use disorder and/or mental health condition are likely to be greatly impacted by the societal changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social distancing may be our best hope to slow the spread of this novel disease. Dr Francis Collins, Director of the National Institutes of Health, noted in his March 20 blog post: “social distancing remains one of the best weapons we have to slow the silent spread of this virus and ‘flatten the curve’ of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will give our healthcare professionals, hospitals, and other institutions more valuable time to prepare, protect themselves, and aid the many people whose lives may be on the line from this coronavirus. Saving lives from COVID-19 requires all of us—young, old, and in-between—to take part.”¹

Patients suffering from a substance use disorder who are enrolled in an outpatient opioid treatment program need to balance the critical need to maintain social distancing with the equally critical need to obtain the necessary medication-assisted treatment for their disorder. And, for those patients with mental health issues, social distancing may cause heightened anxiety and stress with such a disruption to their daily routines.

For both sets of patients, medication adherence is a critical component to their care, and ensuring that access to these services remains uninterrupted can be challenging in such unprecedented times.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) has compiled a series of helpful guidelines that address some of the evolving issues surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak as they relate to patients with substance use disorders and/or mental health conditions.

Please visit the following links from SAMSHA for more information.

[COVID-19 guidance for opioid treatment programs](#)

[Tips for social distancing, quarantine, and isolation during an infectious disease outbreak](#)

[Use of telemedicine while providing medication-assisted treatment](#)

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1. Collins F. NIH director's blog. To beat COVID-19, social distancing is a must. Published March 19, 2020. Accessed March 19, 2020. <https://directorsblog.nih.gov/2020/03/19/to-beat-covid-19-social-distancing-is-a-must/>