

Some LIers Struggle with Alcohol Addiction in Aftermath of COVID-19 Shutdown



St. Charles Hospital in Port Jefferson saw a 30% increase in alcohol rehabilitation and detox admissions, said Dr. Mark Solomon, medical director of the chemical dependency rehabilitation, outpatient maintenance and acute detox units at the hospital. Credit: Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca

By David Olson [@DavidOlson11](mailto:david.olson@newsday.com) Updated July 17, 2021 8:07 PM

Alcohol consumption surged during the COVID-19 pandemic as more people felt isolated or were laid off from their jobs, causing some Long Islanders to struggle with alcohol addiction, experts told Newsday.

Treatment and recovery center officials said they have seen a big increase in people seeking help, both those who previously had problems with alcohol and relapsed, and people who never had serious issues with alcohol.

"People were so stressed out with what was going on," said Jeffrey Friedman, chief executive of CN Guidance and Counseling Services in Hicksville. "Everything was closed down, and they were socially isolated, and the only way to deal with what was going on was to turn to alcohol. It was a way to cope, and not a healthy way."

WHAT TO KNOW

Studies show an increase in alcohol consumption during the pandemic, and Long Island alcohol treatment and recovery centers say more people are seeking help with problem drinking.

Isolation, job loss and the deaths of loved ones from COVID-19 are among the reasons for the increase in problem drinking, experts say.

The pandemic made access to alcohol easier than ever, with curbside pickup and home delivery, and takeout from restaurants and bars. In addition, alcohol was widely touted on social media as a way to cope with COVID-19.

Many who relapsed or began drinking more used alcohol as a way to suppress anxiety or depression, said Dr. Mark Solomon, medical director of the chemical dependency rehabilitation, outpatient maintenance and acute detox units at St. Charles Hospital in Port Jefferson.

More than 41% of Americans reported symptoms of depressive disorder or anxiety disorder in January, compared with 11% in the first half of 2019, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation analysis of federal data.

Patients told Solomon that, with no work or socializing, they were bored, and drinking "helped pass the time."

Some Long Islanders said they began drinking more during the first months of the pandemic in early 2020 but later scaled back.

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Brian Hoarty, 59, of Long Beach, said that instead of having drinks four or five days a week, he started doing so every night during the pandemic, including wine with his wife and two adult sons during dinner, and sometimes vodka or whiskey.

Hoarty, a bond broker who saw his income fall during the pandemic, attributes it partly to stress and uncertainty about the future, and because "a lot of the things you normally do in life, you were cut off from during the pandemic."

Hoarty said he realized he was drinking too much and stopped completely for the first two months of 2021 before settling into three to four drinks a week.

Donna Potish, of Huntington, used to only drink when she went out with friends, but during the pandemic, she and a neighbor got margarita pitchers to go from a restaurant and drank in the backyard, typically about four days a week.

"I had a lot of time on my hands," said Potish, a hairdresser who was out of work for five months.

Once she was back on the job and started socializing more, the backyard margaritas stopped, she said.

Alcohol sales went up nearly 26%

Nationally, alcohol sales in retail stores rose nearly 26% in April, May and June of 2020 compared with the same months in 2019, according to Chicago-based NielsenIQ, a consumer marketing research firm. Sales dropped during those months this year, but were still 15% higher than in April, May and June of 2019, NielsenIQ found.

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020.

Danelle Kosmal, vice president for beverage alcohol practice at NielsenIQ, said the increased retail sales were balanced by a sharp drop in restaurant, bar and other on-premises consumption, indicating the spike in retail sales was primarily because of a shift in where alcohol was consumed, rather than a big increase in how much was consumed.

Even so, studies conducted in the early months of the pandemic found large rises in alcohol use. A study published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found that 60% of respondents to an online survey reported drinking more, and another, in the American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse, found that 60% of binge drinkers increased alcohol consumption during the pandemic, as did 28% of nonbinge drinkers.

St. Charles Hospital saw a 30% increase in alcohol rehabilitation and detox admissions, Solomon said. That was the biggest annual increase he's seen. Most were people who relapsed during recovery, he said.

"A lot of patients lost people to COVID," he said. "A big trigger for relapse or escalation in drug or alcohol use is the loss of a family member."

A typical alcohol rehab stay is 28 days, Solomon said.

In the past, people in recovery may have turned to Alcoholics Anonymous for help, but meetings shifted from in-person to online, which many patients didn't like, Solomon said.

For those who previously had not been drinking excessively, a pandemic-era increase in alcohol use is not necessarily a problem, if the amount being consumed is moderate, he said.

"If someone was drinking once a week and [then] they were having a drink three times a week, that would not be a cause for concern," he said.

"It's drinking to the point where it's interfering with their life" that indicates a problem, Solomon said.

B.J. Miller, of Huntington, said her drinking went up during the pandemic because "it was a way to pass the time" when she couldn't be in-person with others. "And I was very unhappy not being able to do the things I wanted to do," she said.

Now that she's going out with friends and involved again with several nonprofit groups, "I don't have time to drink," she said.

Seeking help when they 'screw up' at work

Others who began drinking excessively during the pandemic are still doing so, and many may not yet realize they need outside help, said Jeff Reynolds, president and CEO of the Garden City-based Family and Children's Association.

"Those people generally [seek help] when they screw up big time at work, they get an arrest for DWI, the family finally has enough, they're looking at a divorce" or after some other major consequence of their drinking, Reynolds said.

Others began realizing they had a problem once they returned to workplaces where "their daily ritual of having a shot at 2 p.m. is no longer viable, and by 4 p.m. they're crawling out of their skin," Reynolds said.

"There were people who were drinking when they were on Zoom calls," he said. "You just didn't see it. Now having to be physically back into an office where people can observe your behavior, they can smell alcohol on your breath, and they're realizing you're coming back a different person than when you left."

Family and friends who hadn't seen someone for months may start noticing "warning signs," such as a friend who arrives at a restaurant for dinner and then has three or four drinks in rapid succession, he said.

Reynolds said alcohol as a way to cope with the pandemic "was almost normalized," with social media memes joking about "day-drinking" and "quarantinis." Access to alcohol was as easy as ever, with curbside pickup and home delivery, and takeout cocktails from restaurants and bars.

There was widespread attention to the increase in fatal drug overdoses during the pandemic, but little said about people struggling with alcohol addiction, he said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Wednesday reported an increase of nearly 30% in drug overdose deaths in 2020, to a preliminary number of 93,331.

But that's still less than the annual deaths from alcohol, according to an October 2020 CDC report that found, from 2011 to 2015, excessive drinking was responsible for an average of 95,158 deaths each year.



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