

COVID-19 IMPACT – By Mulka Nisic, Celebrate Recovery, Bosnia and Herzegovina

This pandemic is truly one of the most dangerous challenges we have faced in our lifetime and people affected by addiction and those in recovery and their families were not the exception. Moreover, the restrictions do not affect everyone equally. Particularly vulnerable are those experiencing multiple disadvantages coupled with drug addiction. With schedules disrupted, medical and psychological care restricted and support networks shut down, the COVID-19 pandemic has jeopardize individual's recovery.

It is my belief that the most vulnerable among those, especially women, children and young people must be supported, with guidance, equipment and concrete life-saving services as they fight the virus, as it is absolutely critical to save lives. But let's not forget that the addiction and recovery don't stop with the pandemic.

In these conditions, with the disease emerging and spreading its devastation so quickly across the country, and with people in lockdown we had to strengthen online and helpline tools and build online community to work together in solidarity to stop the consequences of isolation on people's recovery. Those of us who work in the field of substance use disorders became concerned for those in addiction and recovery as the pandemic spread and social distancing was put in place. The social connection and support are key parts of recovery. Without them, relapse is more likely. And even more concerning is the fact that when people with opioid use disorder relapse, there's more involved than a loss of sobriety. Often there is a loss of life.

To bridge the gap in connections, apart from the free and anonymous helpline, we have developed online support groups that not only provide people with a safe online space to share and socialize and get the support they need, but we also wanted to support social interactivity through innovation and started using a wonderful tool called Inspired recovery board game. The recovery game was developed with and for people in recovery to support the treatment of addiction and also as a tool to prevent relapse. It adopts an asset-building approach to recovery where players have the opportunity to review their individual recovery plans and build their recovery capital. This has truly transformed our group therapy sessions by making it highly interactive and client focused.

The changes in routine, coupled with unstructured free time, made recovery more difficult for them. Although the retention rates have been stable, the added stress contributed to feelings of loneliness, frustration and hopelessness to those in early recovery who were in the first phase of our programme, and they sadly left the programme because meeting forums felt chaotic and not the same.

The impacts of the COVID-19 on women and girls has been substantial and included rising rates of domestic or intimate partner violence, while lockdowns and social distancing may have been particularly hard on survivors of gender-based violence, who may already be economically dependent on their abusers. The hotlines as the only emergency services available to women during the lockdown had 3 fold increase in calls in April which has only decreased by 10 percent

in May! Specialized services have been provided by eight shelters and safe houses in Bosnia and Herzegovina and while all safe houses in the country remained open, providing shelter, psychosocial support and other support services to survivors and their children, they reported lacking capacity and many have been unable to receive new beneficiaries due to the high risk of infection and inability to provide spaces for self-isolation. Large number of cases of violence has been linked with addictions which add to the fact that addiction doesn't affect only the individuals but also families and children. By putting stronger measures in place such as designating shelters and hotlines, the countries could significantly improve devastating and rising rates of violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 crisis. Now more than ever there is a need to send a strong message that violence will not be tolerated, those who carry it out will be brought to justice, and survivors will be heard and supported.

In conclusion based on our conversations, interpersonal connections remain at the core of recovery. Online meetings are far from universally helpful but have played significant role in maintaining support for people in need during the pandemic.