



Alcohol and Other Drug group counselling during coronavirus (COVID-19)

Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in changes to the way people who use alcohol and other drugs are supported. This includes Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) services providing group counselling, which play a vital role in support for people with AOD treatment needs in the community.

The purpose of this document is to provide advice for AOD service providers, including AOD community support groups, on how to stay safe while continuing group counselling services and innovative approaches to ensure support is provided for people during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic including:

- Options to ensure continuity of group counselling services
- Approaches for staying safe when participating in face to face group counselling meetings
- Consideration of implementing innovative alternatives where possible such as virtual/telehealth meetings.

This guidance is current at the date of publication. Services should refer to the department's coronavirus (COVID-19) webpage, available at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus> or call the COVID-19 hotline on 1800 675 398 to seek advice if unsure.

Updated advice on Victoria's restriction levels is available <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/community-services-restrictions-covid-19>.

Providing group counselling services

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in increased demand for access to alcohol and other drug support and advice. In particular, the need for support through services that traditionally provide face to face group counselling, has led services to respond in a range of ways to meet this challenge.

Face to face group counselling services

The following actions should be taken when providing face to face group counselling:

- Keep your distance:
 - Don't shake hands, hug or kiss as a greeting
 - Arrange timing of meetings to avoid crowds and travel during peak periods of the day
 - Ensure the number of people meeting is within the current restrictions (see <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/community-services-restrictions-covid-19> for current advice)
 - Ensure physical distancing of at least 1.5 meters between people and one person per four square meters of available floor space in an indoor setting
 - Signpost how many people are allowed in your group counselling session

- Practice good hygiene:
 - Ask participants to wash hands for at least 20 seconds, using soap and water or a hand sanitiser on arrival and at the end of the session
 - Ensure adequate supplies of hand sanitiser and soap at the facility, for use particularly in bathrooms and upon entering buildings
 - Describe participants personal hygiene actions they can take to prevent coronavirus (COVID-19) including covering their nose and mouth with a tissue when they cough or sneeze. If they don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into their upper sleeve or elbow and avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands
 - Frequently clean and disinfect public areas, particularly high touch surfaces. Advice about cleaning and disinfection can be found at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/factsheet-cleaning-and-disinfecting-local-council>
 - Open windows and or adjust air conditioning to enhance airflow
 - Don't share drink bottles, crockery or cutlery
- Plan for public health and safety measures:
 - Encourage at risk groups (such as older people) to consider virtual/telehealth support options
 - Ask participants who arrive feeling unwell to return home
 - Plan for staff absences due to illness
 - Display educational materials that can be downloaded and printed from the department's coronavirus (COVID-19) website <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/promotional-material-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>
 - Stay informed. Use information from reputable sources such as the department's website
 - Encourage staff and participants to get vaccinated for the flu (influenza)
 - Where possible, keep a record of names and contact details of participants to enable contact tracing in the event of a case of coronavirus (COVID-19) in a group participant. Where this is not possible, encourage attendees to download the COVIDsafe app.

Consider the following initiatives:

- Acknowledge additional pressures on families and carers due to coronavirus (COVID-19) and expand support
- Implement solutions to support a virtual model of care as an alternative channel of support
- Increase contact with people who use alcohol and other drugs requiring support and their families (e.g. more regular phone calls to people not usually engaged in group counselling)
- Co-design of service changes with consumers, families / carers using virtual solutions such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Telephone/virtual platform options for group counselling

A number of solutions have been implemented by services to deliver options for group counselling via telephone, videochat, or online. These include but are not limited to:

- Developing a virtual model of care including guidance on:
 - when virtual care is appropriate
 - planning with consumers and families/carers utilising telephones/video conferencing
 - ongoing support via telephone.
- Simple instructions in plain English for consumers, families and carers about using online platforms.
- Automated text messages to all consumers, families and carers letting them know that alcohol and other drug support is available over the phone and to reply to the text if they would like to receive a call.

Supporting group counselling during coronavirus (COVID-19)

The Department of Health and Human Services and other partners have been working to ensure that people who use alcohol and other drugs have access to support services including group counselling and are adequately resourced and supported to remain connected while physical distancing is in place.

Peer workers in the AOD sector can contact Self Help Addiction Resource Centre (SHARC) for access to updates and online communities of practice. Email: peersupport@sharc.org.au