Recent studies that examine the psychological impact of the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic point toward negative psychological effects including anxiety, loneliness, and feelings of helplessness, boredom, confusion, and depression [1]. Research has shown an increase in the use of addictive substances and behaviors during the COVID-19 quarantine within the general population [2]. However, less is known regarding similar trends among those in treatment for addiction. This letter provides a snapshot of changes in use of substances and addictive behaviors during the COVID-19 quarantine among individuals treated in a specialized outpatient addiction treatment clinic.

We conducted a cross-sectional clinician-administered survey in April 2020 among adults treated at a public outpatient addiction treatment clinic. The clinic provides the following treatment modules: medical treatment, individual psychotherapy, group therapy, couples/family therapy, and rehabilitation. Patients differed in the number and types of therapeutic modules they received. Of 115 patients who were approached for recruitment, 92 participated in the study (response rate 80%, 26 women; mean age 40.1 ± 11.9 years). Participants were asked whether they initiated, increased, decreased, or ceased use of various specific addictive substances and behaviors. All questionnaires were conducted by clinicians who clarified the various substances included in each formal category.

Our results indicate substantial shifts in use, including high rates of increase in the use of addictive substances and behaviors during the COVID-19 quarantine. Among all participants in the study, 35.9% increased the use of at least one substance/behavior (25.0% alcohol, 29.0% cannabis, 29.0% stimulants, 15.0% sedatives, 15.0% pornography, and 11.1% gambling; 10.9% initiated use of an addictive substance/behavior). While women primarily increased use of sedatives (33.3%), men increased use of pornography (22.2%) and gambling behaviors (14.3%). Moreover, higher rates of initiation of substances were found among women compared to men (15.4% of women initiated sedatives, 9.0% initiated alcohol, and 7.7% initiated cannabis, compared to 2.9%, 6.7%, and 4.4%, respectively, among men). Increased use of pornography was particularly found among younger men. Notably, a larger proportion of parents of children below 18 years of age living at home reported higher rates of initiation and increase of several substances. This finding is a matter of concern, as increased use of substances, particularly alcohol, might lead to increased parental malfunctioning and physical abuse or neglect [3]. Among all participants, 16.3% decreased use of at least one substance and 9.8% ceased using an addictive substance/behavior. This result may be partially attributed to lack of social opportunities or to the disruption of access to sellers and financial uncertainty. While decrease or cessation of use of addictive substances may improve health, it should also be regarded with concern. Withdrawal may carry substantial risks and harm and switching to more readily available, although potentially more harmful substances, could posit dangers [4].

Limitations of these findings should be recognized. First, the sample size was limited; hence, comparative strategies were not used. Second, social desirability bias should be considered. Future research should target specific sub-populations (e.g., young adults, elderly populations). Current clinical assessments and post-pandemic assessments should routinely address mental health and addiction, including specific substance use disorders and behavioral addictions, which may have increased or developed de-novo during the pandemic.

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References