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# INSIDE THE RESULTS OF THE “SELF-MEDICATION NATION: THE NUMBING OF AMERICA” SURVEY

Implications of Sierra Tucson's research into  
Pandemic-Inspired Drug Use, Trauma

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The statistics are compelling. One in five (21%) U.S. employees admit they've used alcohol, marijuana, or other recreational drugs during work hours, while employed remotely this year.

And of those who used, three out of four (73%) state that if their employer insists that they return to the office, they'll miss having the opportunity to use marijuana, alcohol, and other recreational drugs during their workday.

These are among the findings of the "Self-Medication Nation" survey of over 1,000 individuals, performed by Ipsos Research for Arizona-based mental health treatment center Sierra Tucson. The survey offers insights for psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, therapists, human resource and employee assistance staff, and other caring professionals who work with the millions of Americans suffering the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.



#### Here are a few Takeaways from the "Self-Medication Nation" Survey:

- A fifth of employees surveyed (21%) said they witnessed a colleague under the influence of marijuana, alcohol, or other recreational drugs while participating in a virtual meeting during the workday.
- When asked why they preferred to work from home versus returning to work at their office, 14% said it's because they could now drink alcohol to relax during the workday and 11% said because they could use marijuana or other drugs to relax during their workday.
- Twenty-two percent of employees surveyed said they had participated in a virtual work call while under the influence of marijuana, alcohol, or other recreational drugs.
- A little over a quarter (28%) of employees surveyed said that an added benefit of working remotely was the opportunity to use alcohol and other recreational drugs during the workday while at home.





Below is a summary of the survey findings. Some of the trends reported in the data may offer valuable insights for those in mental health and counseling professions.

### **Pandemic Inspires Heavy Drinking**

Nearly 60 percent of participants surveyed by Sierra Tucson/Ipsos reported using alcohol during the pandemic, with more men (57.5%) than women (42%) reporting alcohol use. This reported use of alcohol, in and of itself, is not necessarily cause for alarm.

What is cause for concern, however, is that 38% of those who reported consuming alcohol said that during the pandemic their consumption of alcohol increased, and the extent of increase was surprising. The majority (70%) of this sub-sample indicated their use increased by up to 2 drinks per day. Those in the 18-50 age bracket were significantly more likely to report increased alcohol use in comparison to their older

counterparts. Overall, 85% of those drinkers surveyed increased their alcohol use by 1 to 3 drinks a day. If participants in this survey are representative of substance-use behaviors across America, then in some cases many may have added an additional 21 drinks a week to what they were already consuming.

It is vital that those of us in the helping professions be aware of this alarming trend toward heavier drinking – and encourage those who may be at risk, whether loved ones, friends and co-workers, to seek professional help as the pandemic continues to impact the mental well-being of millions.



### **Increased Use of Marijuana during the Pandemic**

Twenty-one percent of our "Self-Medication Nation" survey participants reported using marijuana during the pandemic.

In general, more men reporting using marijuana – comprising 59% of the sub-sample of marijuana users, and nearly half of those men reporting use were young adults, aged 18-35 years old. Fifty-two percent of reported marijuana users also indicated their use had increased during the pandemic. Men made up the majority of those reporting an increase in use, and of those, 64% reported having doubled their marijuana intake.

Because of the psychotropic effects linked to marijuana use – including increased anxiety and depression – clinicians should be watchful for accelerated use of marijuana by their clients and patients.





## Are People Turning to Substances, Rather Than Therapy?



The survey not only revealed the extent of substance use, with more than half (58.5%) of respondents using alcohol, and about one in five (21%) using marijuana since the pandemic started, but the survey also captured why people were using substances.

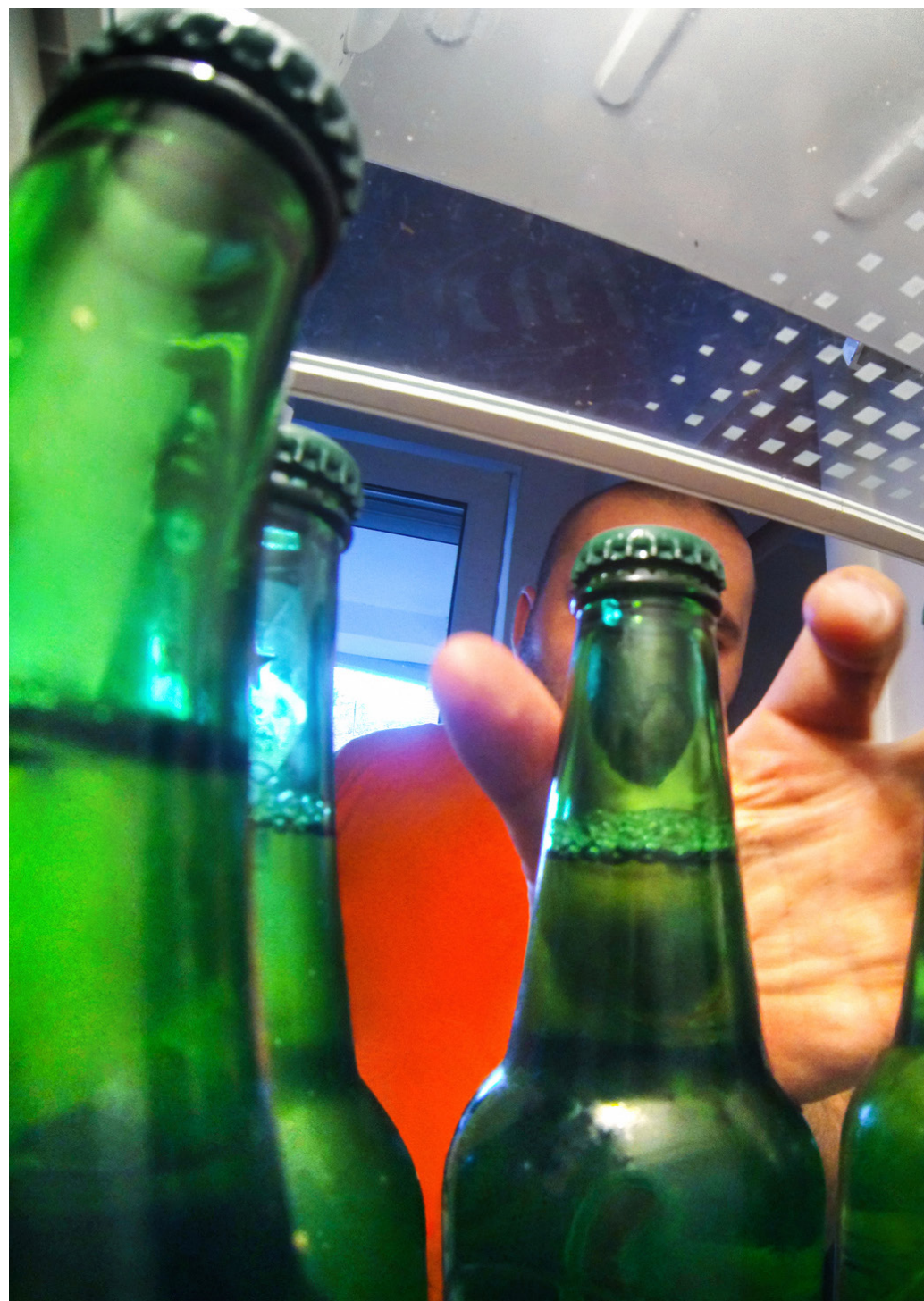
The majority of users reported using marijuana and alcohol for enjoyment, but a noteworthy 41% said they used marijuana to cope with stress, 38% to cope with anxiety, 20% to deal with loneliness, and 31% with depression. A meaningful trend was that young-adult women and career-professional age men tended to use for these reasons more than other age-gender cohorts. Specifically, those in these two age-gender subgroups reportedly used marijuana to cope with depression and stress more than expected.

As for recreational drug use, the amount of reported use during the pandemic was small (6.5%). However, the majority of recreational drug users reported substantial use of alcohol and marijuana. Sixty percent of recreational drug users reported having increased their alcohol consumption between 1-2 drinks per day, whereas 26% reported an increase of 3 drinks per day. The majority reported that their drug use had doubled during the pandemic (66%). These findings may suggest that polysubstance use likely increased during the pandemic. Has the term "recreational" drug use become a misnomer? Might we be observing an uptick in self-medication to cope with stress, anxiety, and other mood challenges?

## Paying Attention to Patients at Special Risk

Emerging from these usage trends were two distinct age-gender groups who were more likely than expected to use substances for enjoyment as they were for those self-medication reasons outlined above. These two groups were young women 18 to 35 years and family-rearing (or career-professional) aged men 35 to 50 years old. Though differing by gender and age, these two subgroups reported similar use behaviors in the "Self-Medication Nation" Survey.

There may be many reasons why the two age-gender subgroups significantly used substance more than others. Every life was altered by stay-at-home orders during the pandemic and perhaps the pandemic interrupted the active lifestyles of young women in ways both socially and professionally that it may not have with men in the same age group. With respect to men in the active professional age range of 35-50 years, many were forced to work from home for the first time. Such changes in lifestyle and career routines may have posed a greater challenge toward adjustment amongst this particular group of men.





**Effects of Increased Drug Use at Home When Employees Return-to-Work**

Findings from the “Self-Medication Nation” survey suggest that many employees working remotely from home may have self-medicated with alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs to cope with the stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression, likely caused by the pandemic.

Many reported substance use as an added benefit of working remotely. Such an attitude is cause for concern among those of us in the addiction treatment field: Once the COVID-19 pandemic eases, will we see a rise in the substance-use epidemic?

The behaviors and attitudes captured by the Ipsos survey point to a trend in increased substance use among a new cohort of employees: those who are working remotely from home. Employers and clinicians should be prepared to help those employees in need with access to counseling and treatment.

If your clients are at-risk, it's important to communicate to them that they're not alone in experiencing an uptick in stress, anxiety, and use of alcohol and other substances. As people begin to return to a “new normal” many may continue to experience the effects of COVID-19. For those who began a substance-use habit or found themselves notably increasing their substance-use to unmanageable heights as a way to self-medicate during the pandemic, many now may find themselves in need of therapeutic support.

**Begin Outreach to the Self-Medicating Who Are Avoiding Therapy**

Not everyone has been able to “adjust” well during the pandemic, and for many the pandemic was palpably traumatic.

Only 13% of those surveyed in the “Self-Medication Nation” Survey sought out therapy for anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. Instead of coping with pandemic-sparked mental health issues through therapy, might Americans be turning to drugs and alcohol instead? Although many survey respondents reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout due to the pandemic, the data revealed fewer people sought support from mental health professionals, yet more people reported increased substance use.

If the survey is a representation of COVID-19 behaviors and attitudes across the country, then the findings warrant an opportunity for mental health professionals and even employers to be proactive in identifying people who may be struggling and in need of help.





## The Value of Assessing Your Patients for Trauma

The coronavirus pandemic has been traumatic on a global scale. The traumatic impact of COVID-19 has not only affected the “healthcare heroes” on the frontlines of medical treatment, but has also impacted every single one of us. From losing a loved-one, contracting the virus and surviving, or having had financial well-being drastically altered.

Not everyone responds to traumatic events with resiliency and dogged perseverance, which enables them to move on with “post-traumatic growth.” It’s also common that many do not cope well with prolonged stress and uncertainty, which – over time – can lead to burnout, depression, and the psychophysiological negative effects of chronic stress. Those in this latter category often experience “post-traumatic stress disorder” or PTSD. The results of this survey suggest that mental health professionals consider whether PTSD is contributing to their clients’ mental health issues and/or troublesome substance-use. The Veterans’ Association has produced a trauma-symptom checklist which is available freely on the public domain:

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/adult-sr/ptsd-checklist.asp>

We recommend clinicians consider using a symptom-rating scale such as the PCL-5 when evaluating their clients, especially those who seek out therapy for COVID-19 related support. At Sierra Tucson, all our admitting patients complete the PCL-5 in addition to other measures to obtain a comprehensive assessment of psychological and quality of life functioning. Understanding how traumatic events, whether historical or current, impact an individual’s life and relationships is fundamental to Sierra Tucson’s trauma-informed care approach.





# REFERRING YOUR PATIENTS TO SIERRA TUCSON

Sierra Tucson welcomes referrals of new patients and clients from psychiatrists, addiction professionals, psychologists, interventionists, social workers, primary care physicians, counselors, and HR professionals.

As a referring professional, we encourage you to call Sierra Tucson's admissions coordinators at 855-373-7752 (US Toll-free) to discuss your client's presenting issues and explore their admission to our Tucson, Arizona facility. Sierra Tucson closely coordinates admission to our facility with referring professionals to ensure continuity of care for patients. In addition, we handle all insurance authorization and billing on-site, to alleviate that stress from the client and their family.

For more information on how to refer a patient or client to Sierra Tucson, please visit:

<https://www.sierratucson.com/about/professionals/referral-guide/>





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