

# Protecting the SMI population from COVID-19: Best practices for community mental health agencies and health centers

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For individuals with a serious mental illness (SMI)—a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder that interferes with or limits major life activities—the COVID-19 pandemic may present a particular threat.<sup>1</sup> To slow the spread of infection among this population, behavioral health providers and community-based health centers may want to communicate with their clients, as well as their caregivers, about social distancing and prevention practices. In addition, they may hope to mitigate the negative impact of social isolation.

In this brief, requested by a Michigan-based community mental health agency, we share a number of practices that may be useful to providers and caregivers who work with individuals with an SMI.

## **When communicating COVID-19 safety protocols, use client-facing materials designed with particular audience needs in mind.**

- This guide to COVID-19 safety protocols—including how the infection is passed and how to prevent its spread—was written by and for [people with intellectual and developmental disabilities](#).
- The Annie App, which can be downloaded free of charge, sends [automated text messages to veterans](#) including messages that discuss COVID-19 safety and self-care protocols.
- This guide to hygiene was written for [caregivers of individuals with schizophrenia](#). The goals, which caregivers are asked to reinforce, are designed to be both practical and achievable.
- This article may work well for [clients who live in group homes and shared spaces](#) and need to discuss social distancing with family members or roommates. In addition, these protocols were developed in San Francisco to guide social distancing in [shelters and other group home environments](#).
- For [older adults, children, people with underlying health conditions, and caregivers](#), these tailored messages to support psychosocial wellbeing were developed by the World Health Organization.
- For [individuals with severe anxiety and depression](#), this five-point plan shares Mental Health First Aid practices.
- Care coordinators can also provide personal encouragement through texts or phone calls and can develop simple tools like “wash your hands” reminder signs for clients to hang on commonly used doors, etc.

## **Make use of telehealth to address COVID-19 challenges including safety protocols, the psychosocial effects of isolation, and more.**

- Psychotherapy and behavioral therapy, delivered via phone or video, can help clients with SMI feel more motivated and better equipped to handle everyday tasks. If clients are quarantining with family, engage family members in these sessions when appropriate.

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Druss, [Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in populations with a serious mental illness](#), JAMA Psychiatry Viewpoint, April 3, 2020.

- SMI Advisor notes that [most people with SMI use a mobile phone](#), with the majority using a smartphone. They offer [free clinician-to-clinician consults](#) for evidence-based, person-centered care for SMI populations and answer provider questions, including implementation and telehealth questions.
- This checklist from the Anxiety and Depression Association of America lists [important considerations for providing telehealth](#) to clients with mental health needs. They also outline [intentional strategies for effective telehealth sessions](#).
- The Michigan Health Endowment Fund has outlined a host of [telehealth implementation resources](#) with state-specific information.
- The National Council for Behavioral Health has developed a [list of telehealth best practices](#). The National Register of Health Service Psychologists has also developed a [directory of resources](#) for telepsychology.
- The [Michigan Department of Health and Human Services "warmline"](#) is run by peers and can be particularly useful for individuals living with serious and persistent mental illness.
- [Crisis text lines](#) are also available 24/7 and may be helpful between visits for social isolation and heightened anxiety as a result of COVID-19.
- For [clients concerned with phone minutes or data usage](#), check the list of companies who have taken steps to offer free or reduced price options to customers.

### **Emphasize wellness activities that help clients manage their condition and COVID-related stress.**

- The International OCD Foundation offers [tips for taking care of mental health needs](#) during COVID-19 including setting a routine, creating new healthy habits, and developing a self-care toolkit personalized to your own sensory preferences.
- Creating a routine can help everyone feel a bit more grounded. This [guide from NAMI](#) offers suggestions for a productive morning routine.
- Wellness apps like [Calm](#) can help clients with sleep, meditation, and relaxation. The state of Michigan has partnered with [Headspace](#) to offer free mental health and self-care resource during COVID-19.
- Encourage clients to use technology to speak with friends or family, stream religious services through Facebook or YouTube, or participate in group therapy sessions with peers.
- In terms of physical activities, SAMHSA suggests routine daily [walks can combat feelings of social isolation](#). Many [gyms are offering free online programs](#) to everyone, not just members, during COVID-19.
- Balancing healthy choices with dwindling grocery stocks and a fixed income can make nutrition a challenge. The USDA's [ChooseMyPlate](#) offers tasty, low-cost recipes.
- Care coordinators, nurses, and direct care staff can consult this [clinical nutrition guide](#) for a refresher in planning diets and balancing nutrients in order to help clients make better decisions.

### **Keep in mind that clients may also need social supports to weather COVID-19.**

- The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services maintains a [coronavirus website](#) with information about obtaining unemployment assistance, healthcare coverage, food assistance, and more.