

# It's time to change the conversation around substance use on-Island

As we round the corner on a year of living with COVID, most of us are aware of the impacts of the pandemic on our lives — isolation, anxiety, boredom, depleted savings, depleted tolerance, depleted goodwill (perhaps). An incredible thirst for travel, the sight of smiling faces, and spending time in crowded places.

In a story published on Tuesday in STAT, the Boston Globe's daily health newsletter, the CDC reported another grim effect on the lives of Americans: a 20 percent increase in, and the highest-ever number of, fatal overdoses ever recorded in the U.S. in a single year.

Though we are small, and have luckily been spared an increase in overdose deaths, the underlying struggles behind those numbers are as true here on Martha's Vineyard as everywhere else: The pandemic has for so many of us magnified the isolation, the harsh economic realities, the lack of in-person communing, and the daily friendly contacts who may have acted as guardrails (or guardian angels). As Times reporter [Brian Dowd wrote several months ago](#), more Vineyarders have overdosed in this past year, more of us have struggled in recovery, and more family members have sought help for loved ones suffering from depression or addiction.

“We found that the people who were periodically relapsing were relapsing more frequently,” Robert Cropper, a recovery coach and supervisor with Martha's Vineyard Community Services (MVCS), told Dowd. “It just increased dramatically.”

In May, Cropper said, the recovery community began to see more relapses when many people had extra time on their hands, were at home and isolated, and, for some, not working. The number of calls from family members seeking help for another family member also increased “dramatically” during May, June, and July. Before the coronavirus pandemic began, Cropper said, MVCS fluctuated between 30 and 40 clients at a time — in June, the program was up to 70 clients.

The months since have only seen the situation worsen, according to Brian Morris, a rehabilitation counselor who is also in recovery. The troubling caseload into the

summer was “exacerbated further by seasonal despair. People are disconnecting, people are dropping out to their own rhythms, and often resorting to default mechanisms, such as compulsively doing what they’re obsessively driven to do, which is drink and drug.”

Though the pandemic has dramatically increased the problem, Martha’s Vineyard has always had more than its share of people suffering from depression, alcoholism, and other substance use disorders. Milton Mazer, a psychiatrist who would go on to found Community Services, described in his book “People and Predicaments” that Vineyarders suffered from depression and alcoholism at twice the rate of others in the state.

According to Martha’s Vineyard Hospital psychiatrist and MVCS medical director Dr. Charles Silberstein, the Martha’s Vineyard Health Report of 2004 found that 30 percent of year-round residents routinely drank to excess by CDC standards — about twice the rate of what you’d expect to find in similar communities in other parts of the country.

In the film “On Island,” which Lucas Thors viewed on Thursday and [reports on in these pages](#), we see Islanders whose lives have been turned upside down by addiction. The film, produced by the Public Good Projects (PGP), in collaboration with the Martha’s Vineyard Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Coalition, features our fellow Islanders speaking honestly about their struggles, and the unique challenges Islanders face.

One Island resident shared their response to the film: “I like that the film captures the difference of being on the Island versus off-Island. I feel I can never accurately describe to my off-Island family and friends the differences and the allure of the party lifestyle that fulfills you in the summer and leaves you drinking alone at the bar in February.”

The film did an excellent job of depicting the issues we currently face, and the significant ways the SUD Coalition and other caring Islanders hope to move beyond where we are.

In a Q and A that followed the screening of the film, the Rev. Chip Seadale, who serves on the SUD Coalition, stressed that the “whole idea of the film is to get as many people in the Island community involved in shifting our collective behavior to more healthy norms, and build a culture that works on reducing substance misuse, destigmatizes addiction, and prevents or delays first use among Island

youth.”

There’s a bright light shining in that statement.

According to Silberstein, the biggest contributing factor (50 to 70 percent) in whether a person is likely to become addicted to substances is genetics. So how is that good news?

“Interestingly,” Silberstein says, “if someone never starts using substances until their early to mid-20s, the chance of them manifesting that genetic predisposition is next to none.”

It makes sense, he says: Your brain simply learns much more efficiently when you are a teenager, including the most satisfying (though not necessarily healthy) ways to comfort yourself.

Which means, Silberstein and others on the project stress, it’s crucial to urge people to delay first use. Though the Vineyard has excelled in recent years in helping Islanders already struggling with addiction, and you’ll see evidence of that in the film, Silberstein says he “firmly believes that we can address this illness way earlier. We can abort its progress.”

The film, then, is only the first step in a vision to see if Martha’s Vineyard can not only change its health habits, but also change the culture of permissiveness on the Island around substances. It’s likely a two-year project (or more).

“No one’s ever looked at one community and said, ‘Can we change the communications around substance use across the culture?’” Silberstein added.

It’s a tall order. But the “On Island” crew, and the SUD Coalition, believe Martha’s Vineyard is a perfect place to experiment with such a noble goal.

It will take all of us — questioning how we behave, what we share with our children, how we communicate.

Care to help? Go to [onislandmv.org](https://www.onislandmv.org).