



COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:

HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Version 2, 4/20/20

The COVID-19 outbreak has placed healthcare workers on the front lines of caring in an array of distressing, and sometimes traumatic, fear-inducing, unpredictable, and heartbreaking situations. As a healthcare worker you often do not have the luxury of physically distancing, which places you at increased risk of being infected with the virus. You also may not have enough access to equipment and supplies, work long hours with little time for breaks or self-care, and may be expected to practice beyond the traditional boundaries of your competence. You may find yourself pained by witnessing people who are critically ill and dying on their own, with no visitors allowed, and by the despair of family members who cannot be with their loved ones. You may be distressed that you are with your patients instead of at home with your own family or worried about spreading the virus to your family or others. Having to deal with ethical dilemmas and moral injury (i.e., mental, emotional, and spiritual distress when you must make choices that violate your closely held values and principles) may also be affecting you. If you're experiencing some or all of these stressors, it is likely that you're feeling distressed, and possibly even overwhelmed or burned out. It is normal to feel anxiety, sadness, and a range of other complex emotions at this time, but you may be struggling to manage your distress and function as you normally would at work, home, and in other domains of your life. Although no tip sheet can fully address what you are dealing with and facing as a front-line healthcare worker, some of the tips below may help you to manage a bit better than you are now. Helpful resources also are included.

Take Care of Yourself as Much as you Possibly Can

- Prioritize your basic needs while working (although this may seem trivial, it's very important)
 - Take breaks to eat, even snacks, and drink alone or with a colleague
 - Pause and take a moment to mindfully deep breathe (breath cycle of 12 seconds, 6 in, 6 out; 4 in, 4 hold, 4 out), especially after stressful situations
 - Consider seeking support from spiritual care providers in your setting
- Prioritize your basic needs outside of work
 - Make sleep a priority
 - Try to at least maintain a consistent sleep schedule and if possible, avoid doing work, eating, and socializing where you sleep
 - Make time to move or exercise
 - Consider short workouts
 - Plan work-out times
 - Turn workouts into social activities (e.g., workout at same time or with same virtual guides as a family member, friend, coworker)



- Engage in activities you find pleasurable and/or calming/relaxing
- Participate in yoga, mindfulness, and cognitively-based compassion therapy (CBCT) sessions available free for healthcare workers (see resource list below)
- Limit your substance use
- Seek out spiritual care support resources
- Take a break from COVID-19
 - Limit media and social media related to COVID-19
 - Limit your time talking and thinking about COVID-19
- Self-monitor and pace yourself as much as possible
 - Check in with yourself about how you are doing/feeling at the beginning, middle, and end of each shift
 - Ask for help when you need it (again, this may seem trivial but it's important)
 - Prepare yourself for combat, not a sprint or even a marathon
- Differentiate between what is and is not within your power and act accordingly
 - Take action to change the things you can
 - Focus on present tasks and challenges rather than on the past or future “what if” scenarios
 - Consider offering solutions to solvable workplace problems
 - Schedule your nonwork time to meet your needs
 - Prioritize time to do activities you enjoy outside of work
 - Act mindfully to ensure good self-care when not at work
 - Spend time with people you care about and get creative with how you do this
 - Use radical acceptance in response to things you cannot control
 - Say yes to life just as it is
 - Acknowledge, accept, and find time to process things that are not within your control
- Be more accepting of your emotions and thoughts
 - Recognize that anxiety related to actual threats and risks is understandable, helpful, and not pathological
 - Talk with others in your life who are empathetic and validating about how you are feeling
 - Accept your anxious, helpless, and hopeless thoughts (rather than try to push them away or change them) and let them wash through you like a wave as you turn your attention to the present
 - Set aside 5-10 minutes every day or after your workday is over to process uncomfortable emotions
 - Remind yourself that any stressful feelings you may be experiencing are understandable
 - Use “both/and” statements to promote self-compassion and clarify distress-



ing contradictory feelings - “I’m both a dedicated healthcare worker expected to care for patients no matter what, and I am an involved family member who wants to care for loved ones at home”

- Show yourself compassion
 - Be guided by the motto, “good enough”; no one can or will be perfect
 - Exercise self-compassion by reminding yourself you are doing the best you can in any given moment
 - Remind yourself when you are feeling overwhelmed that you are contributing significantly and honor the service you are providing
- Seek individual therapy and/or medication if you feel too distressed or overwhelmed to function
 - Check out local behavioral health resources targeted toward COVID-19 healthcare workers
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Promote Teamwork

- Look out for each other
- Check-in regularly (informally and formally) with team members
 - Use huddle time to see how providers are emotionally and physically coping with stress and demands
 - Talk informally with colleagues about things happening at work
 - Chat with colleagues about what they are doing to relax outside of work
- Be intentional about good communication
 - Respect differences and interact with tolerance, patience, and compassion
 - Take time to listen to others
 - Talk clearly and calmly with colleagues
 - Address tensions, concerns, problems or conflicts when they emerge and strive to resolve them
- Foster team unity
 - Prioritize collaboration
 - Try to help colleagues problem-solve
 - Step forward to help when you can and allow others to step forward when they can
 - Use humor when appropriate
 - Take time together to listen to a mindfulness app, share what everyone is grateful about, and/or join in a prayer circle
 - Construct a gratitude box where team members can write small notes to each other
 - Be intentional, pause, debrief, and support one another after tough cases/situations
 - Seek out peer and team consultation when needed



- Recognize and celebrate the helpful and/or creative contributions of colleagues
 - Encourage formal recognition of contributions by starting a sticky-note wall in a break room where staff can leave notes
 - End shifts with a huddle and have each person thank another team member for something they did
 - Thank team members throughout the shift for small and large ways they were helpful
 - Recognize formally people who go above and beyond the call of duty and those who are unsung heroes/heroines
- Request support and debriefings from a trained mental health provider

Connect with Others

- Distance physically, not emotionally, and prioritize connecting and interacting with others
- Talk with allies/trusted co-workers and receive support from one another
- Share your experiences and concerns (including about infecting loved ones) with understanding and supportive family/friends during and after work
- Have ongoing conversations with your partner and/or other family members about the stress you are under and its impact, how things are and will continue to change, and ways they can be of assistance
 - Brainstorm how to communicate optimally and a structure for doing so
 - Plan strategies for managing competing demands
 - Determine helpful home changes or routines
 - Reassure them you are doing what you can to take care of yourself
- Recognize and process any split loyalties you are experiencing (e.g., family versus work, taking care of self versus taking care of others, being safe at home and feeling guilty not working versus providing services at work while feeling afraid and unsafe)
 - Address and strive to come to some resolution with the support of others
 - Come to terms with the impossibility of a perfect solution
- Prioritize compassion toward COVID-19 positive patients and people under investigation (PUI) and their families
 - Take time to talk with each patient, listen to them, and offer them care
 - Ensure a family member is connected by a healthcare provider at least once per day
 - Strive to connect patients and their families virtually, recognizing the challenges of this
 - Ensure a moment of silence when each patient dies and include the patient's family to the extent possible



Manage High-Risk Situations

- Ensure you're up to date with information about how to handle high-risk situations
- Stop, breathe, think, and then act when confronted with a high-risk situation
- Take the extra time and effort to ensure your own safety
- Recognize and manage anticipatory anxiety
 - Remember that you are not alone, and your reaction is understandable and normal
 - Strive to block the anxiety until the immediate situation is over
 - Process your reactions
 - Visualize packaging up and throwing away the anxiety
 - Keep moving forward mentally
- Be attuned to situations that raise moral distress/injury and discuss and address those with your colleagues and consultants
- Say to yourself what you would tell a friend when they are most scared
- Provide colleagues distressed about high risk situations
 - Your presence and listening ear
 - A genuine human and emotional response
 - Empathy
 - Positive regard
- Be guided by an ethical framework when making challenging clinical decisions
 - Hold conversations with patients and family members about goals of care in the setting of acute life-threatening illness, especially for high-risk patients
 - Provide care consistent with patients' values and goals
 - Consult with supervisors and colleagues about challenging ethical dilemmas; their perspective may provide additional insight and support when making difficult decisions



Acknowledge Grief Responses and Existential Challenges

- Identify and grieve the multiple, significant losses associated with the pandemic
 - Recognize losses in multiple life domains including usual routines, ways of practicing healthcare, views of the world, feelings of safety, ways of coping, worsening disparities, and/or deaths of people you know and do not know
 - Realize that many of the losses are ambiguous and without closure
 - Validate the losses that are ongoing and not tangible
- Acknowledge key existential struggles related to such topics as identity, freedom, isolation, meaning, mortality, and death
 - Reflect upon these struggles yourself
 - Discuss these topics with people you trust and with whom you are close
- Engage in meaning making both professionally and personally
 - Consider the positive aspects of your life that remain the same and are unchanging
 - Maintain hope, even in the face of considerable challenge, related to what is positive in your life, your relationships, and your work

Helpful Resources

- Cognitively-Based Compassion Training Resources: <https://www.compassion.emory.edu/center-covid19-response.html>
- The National Center for PTSD: [Managing Healthcare Worker's Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak](#)
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress: [Sustaining the Well-Being of Healthcare Personnel During Coronavirus and Other Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
- COVID Trauma Response Working Group: [Guidance for planners of the psychological response to stress experienced by hospital staff associated with COVID: Early Interventions](#)
- British Columbia Disaster Worker Care Committee: [Tips During and After Shifts](#)
- World Health Organization: [Mental Health Considerations during COVID-19 Outbreak](#)
- World Health Organization: [Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers](#)
- Intensive Care Society: [Advice for Sustaining Staff Wellbeing in Critical Care During and Beyond COVID-19](#)
- The Harvard Business Review: [That Discomfort You are Feeling is Grief](#)
- Curtis, J.R., Kross, E.K., & Stapleton, R.D. (2020). The importance of addressing advance care planning and decisions about do-not-resuscitate orders during novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). *JAMA*: <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.4894>



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