

Taking Care of Your Emotional Well-Being: Tips for Health Care Workers During COVID-19

Widespread community transmission of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is putting a strain on everyday life. All New Yorkers are trying to keep themselves and their loved ones safe, while coping with the loss of community members and the new realities of physical distancing. Health care workers, including clinical providers, administrators and maintenance staff, face unique stressors and challenges. Supporting the physical and mental well-being of health care workers is critical to slowing the spread of the virus and protecting our communities. Knowing how stress uniquely impacts health care workers can help them cope during these difficult times.

COVID-19-Related Stress in Health Care Settings

- **Evolving information:** This is a new virus that had not been previously found in humans. Health care workers must adapt to changing updates to clinical guidance.
- **Supply shortages:** Increases in critically ill patients have led to shortages of essential medical supplies including personal protective equipment (PPE).
- **Staff shortages:** As health care workers get sick or take time off to care for sick family members, staffing is further strained.

COVID-19-Related Stress in Health Care Workers

- **Risk of infection:** Health care workers are at an increased risk of infection. Workers may have to weigh health risks, including keeping their families safe, with potential of loss of income.
- **Workload:** Many are working extra or longer shifts, performing duties outside of their usual role and with a heavier workload.
- **Patient volume:** Stress related to potentially having to make difficult decisions regarding time and resources can feel overwhelming.
- **Physical stress:** Health care workers may be experiencing physical pain associated with longer shifts, wearing protective gear and changing routines and protocols.
- **Death toll:** Caring for critically ill patients and witnessing the rising death toll is difficult. Health care workers may express feelings of anger, helplessness, or a loss of control.
- **New surroundings:** Health care providers may be working in new environments; some have volunteered to work in new settings or returned from retirement. For many, a new environment can add another element of stress.

Ways to Manage Stress

It is important to remember to take care of yourself so you can continue to care of others. While there are many things outside of your control, focus on the things that are within your control to help manage stress and anxiety and promote resilience.

- **Feel your feelings.** Acknowledge when you feel sad, angry, frustrated and exhausted. It is natural for those feelings to be overwhelming at times. Recognize what you are feeling in the moment and know that it is okay.

- **Self-monitor physical and mental health.** Notice changes that might indicate physical illness or increased anxiety or depression. Free services are being offered online or via applications (apps) that help with mindfulness and mental health support. NYC Well offers a number of well-being and emotional support apps that can help you cope. Visit the “App Library” at nyc.gov/nycwell for online tools to help you manage your health and emotional well-being. Check with your employer for support services that may be available to staff.
- **Take breaks as you are able.** Even if for just a minute or two, allow yourself to stop and re-focus on where you are, how you are feeling and what you must do next. Breathing and other mindfulness exercises can help calm anxiety and re-establish focus when feeling overwhelmed.¹
- **Take a break from the news.** Be sure to set aside time for something outside of work and COVID-19-related news. Engage in an activity that is fun and relaxing for you.
- **Be sure to eat and sleep regularly.** In stressful situations, we often forget our most basic needs. Make time for adequate rest, healthy eating, and engaging in physical activity.

Stay Connected

Now more than ever it is important to stay connected to loved ones and our support networks.

- **Check in with family, friends and loved ones.** Use text, video chat, phone or social media. A quick hello can remind you that people are grateful for your hard work and commitment.
- **Check in with colleagues while working.** Speak with supervisors and coworkers, acknowledge the stress everyone shares, and support each other.
- **Identify and use your support network.** Know whom to reach out to when you feel sad or angry or need a break. Identify activities that help you cope with specific feelings, so they are ready to respond when needed.

Create a Supportive Work Environment

Many standard policies and procedures are evolving to meet the needs of the COVID-19 response. This can lead to confusion and increased stress. Leadership should provide additional support to help reduce these feelings.

- **Communicate clearly and often with staff.** Acknowledge that things are constantly changing but provide consistent and clear messaging as situations evolve. Promote a sense of calm and safety while acknowledging difficult circumstances.
- **Acknowledge concerns of staff.** Make sure staff feel heard, and address concerns. Be clear about the status of protective measures, including PPE, patient protocols and resource allocation. There might not be an answer for everything, but questions should still be heard.

¹**Breathing:** Take slow, deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Notice your stomach expand as you breathe in, and feel it contract as you breathe out. Repeat.

Mindfulness: The practice of being aware and present. Ground yourself in the present by bringing your attention to your current surroundings. For example, take the time to notice five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell and one thing you taste.

- **Provide training and stress management opportunities.** Incorporate stress management tools into standard protocols. Provide outlets and resources for staff to receive mental health support. Make staff feel safe and encouraged to access those resources when needed.

Additional Support and Information

For additional information on stress and anxiety, including tips for coping and staying connected and information on grief and loss, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.

NYC Well offers well-being and emotional support applications (apps) that can help you cope. Many of these resources are offering free, premium services for health care workers. If your symptoms of stress become overwhelming, contact NYC Well to speak with a trained counselor, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, in over 200 languages. Call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text “WELL” to 65173 or chat at nyc.gov/nycwell.

New York State's COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline is staffed with specially trained volunteer professionals. They will be there to listen, support and offer referrals 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week at 844-863-9314.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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