Addressing Healthcare Worker Anxiety about the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in the United States continues to evolve, with more cases and quarantines popping up on news feeds everywhere. The closer it gets to their homes, the more people are worrying. But what about the people on the front lines?

Nurses, doctors and other medical professionals who are testing for and treating COVID-19 are at a higher risk of contracting it than the general public. What can they do to take care of themselves, physically and emotionally?

As Kushal, Gupta and Mehta stated in *Study of Stress among Health Care Professionals: A Systemic Review,* "Work related stress is a potential cause of concern in healthcare workers and is associated with decreased job satisfaction, days off work, anxiety, depression, sleeplessness , medical errors and near misses." Long shifts and working with sick people—some of whom are gravely ill—can lead to burnout and anxiety from their normal jobs.

Already-struggling healthcare workers are now faced with COVID-19 unknowns and demands, including taking care of people with confirmed cases of the virus. While they may feel they are at the whims of the virus, there are things healthcare workers can do to take some control over their work environment and manage their fear or anxiety.

- **Know what your organization's plans are.** Read the business continuity plan and know your role. Talk to your team members about cross-training and covering for each other if one of you gets sick. In addition, ensure you are following proper protocols for cleaning and preventing spread. Visit cdc.gov for helpful information. This is particularly important for behavioral health providers who may not always think about universal precautions.
- **Surround yourself with green.** If your facility permits, bring in a few plants to liven up your surroundings. Being around plants has a calming effect on people. Employees who work in offices with plants tend to feel better about their jobs, worry less and take fewer sick days.[1] If you can't have plants in your space, take time to look out the window and find some green. You may find that is enough for a quick mental break and perspective.
- **Use small tools to create a calming environment.** A small water feature, a sand garden or hourglass, stress balls and other items can provide a quick way to refresh your mind. Or just step back, take deep breaths, stretch and/or meditate.
- **Find someone to talk to.** Some hospitals have on-site or on-call chaplains; take advantage of them. Don't be afraid to talk to your coworkers about how you are feeling. Chances are, they are feeling the same way and would welcome a discussion. Many medical settings offer a form of rounds that addresses the emotional impact of caring for a particular patient or theme. Similar semi-structured

discussion groups with peers can be very helpful in handling stress and preventing the development of PTSD.[2]

- **Get professional help.** Be open to contacting your organization's Employee Assistance Program if you find yourself developing "compassion fatigue," where your desire to help others erodes.
- **Limit exposure to media.** Media outlets have a tendency to sensationalize stories, so it's important to consume news thoughtfully and with a critical eye.

In addition, do all the normal things to take care of yourself: try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs. Doing these things can have a positive impact on your mental health and help you manage anxiety.

Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or go online to MagellanAscend.com.

For more information and tips, visit MagellanHealth.com/COVID-19. We wholeheartedly thank you for all you are doing to combat this outbreak.

1: https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/ss/slideshow-health-benefits-houseplants.
2: See Schwartz rounds.

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