

Addressing healthcare worker anxiety about the Coronavirus (COVID-19): part two

As the pandemic grows, healthcare workers are experiencing a new level of stress and fear. Since our first piece about healthcare workers and mental health, the toll that COVID-19 cases have taken on them has become more difficult than any could have imagined.

First, let us again say thank you to all of you, from EMTs who answer the first calls to the doctors and nurses who tend to the sickest. Your selflessness and heroism is inspiring.

We've set up a counseling hotline for healthcare workers and first responders at 1-800-327-7451 (TTY 711). Your call will be answered by our licensed mental health clinicians. Our team is trained and ready to listen and help during this difficult time.

There are so many things that are out of our control. We are dependent on others to address many aspects of the big picture, but there are things outlined below that we can do for ourselves and those close to us. No single recommendation is enough by itself, but when taken together, they may help.

Talk about it

Acknowledge your anxiety, fear and grief, and talk about it.

Many of our colleagues and friends say that leaning on fellow healthcare workers is very difficult. Everyone's heart beats a little bit faster when they greet a COVID-19-positive patient, so how can we ask them to support one another? Yet this is what we do as a medical community daily. Peer support is key.

- If a compassion fatigue group isn't available at your workplace, work with your employer to put one together.
- If a group option isn't available, talk to your co-workers about what you are seeing and how it is affecting you. You'll be surprised at how many share your feelings but have been afraid to say anything. Hospital workers have talked about how a quick meeting at the beginning of their shift, during a break or at other times—to talk, pray, or have a moment of silence—has helped them tremendously.¹

- Many hospital systems have been deploying their psychiatric workforce as volunteers to help colleagues who need it.² Ask your employer if this is available.
- If you don't want to talk about it at work, find a former co-worker or friend from school or training to talk to, or contact Magellan Healthcare at the phone number above.
- Finally, if you are at a point where your feelings impact your ability to perform or feel comfortable in your role, talk to your supervisor or your organization's human resources group about your employee assistance programs. Monitor your physical and mental symptoms. You may reach a position that you need to be treated by a behavioral health professional. If that happens, contact one as soon as possible.

Make your voice heard

Some healthcare workers are feeling betrayed by their employers and others.² Whether it's lack of PPE, feeling unappreciated or being expected to work excessive hours, these feelings can make an already untenable situation worse. While there is much you cannot control, don't let that stop you from advocating for yourself and others.

- Ask for more PPE or the protocols for how it is allocated. Understanding why things are happening can help people accept them and enable you and your colleagues to offer suggestions from the front lines.
- If you are frustrated about things that you see, think about how you would make them better. Make a list and discuss them with coworkers to come up with solutions. Once things slow down, you'll have strong suggestions for improving your work environment.

Maintain focus

- Remember why you became a healthcare worker. Maybe you watched a family member battle an illness, or you felt a calling to help people. Think about that during these times.
- Remind yourself that what you are doing is noble. The cognitive impact of recognizing the value you offer will help you serve your patients in a positive way.
- Consistent with your training and dedication, keep your focus on the patient in front of you, on protecting yourself to the best of your abilities and extending those protections to the home setting when you are off work.
- When you are off work, turn your focus to what is happening in the moment.
- Exercising may feel like a lofty goal as well. Try to find 10 minutes for a brisk walk, or a quick set of jumping jacks, sit-ups and push-ups.
- If you don't have time or energy to cook, find easy-to-eat fresh foods like bananas, oranges and carrots.
- To help you relax and get to sleep, try apps like Headspace, Calm and Balance. AMA members can access these for free. For more serious problems with sleeplessness, visit your program website to get started with the RESTORE® app.
- Finally, if you are on medications for a pre-existing behavioral health condition, don't stop taking them, and contact your provider if your symptoms are getting worse.

Take care of yourself

- We acknowledge that recommending meditation or focusing on breathing in the midst of chaos and fear may not seem helpful for some. Think about how you breathe when you are stressed. Some of us hold our breath without realizing it; others breathe very shallowly. We don't realize it until we get around to taking a real breath.
- As you work around people with COVID-19, you might be afraid to breathe deeply. If you can, try to go to a place where you feel comfortable doing so, and take a few deep, slow breaths. Something as simple as this can release stress and clear your mind.

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 visit your program website to get started.

1. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-doctors-nurses-praying-hospital-roofs-covid-19-patients-families/>
<https://www.kens5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/san-antonio-area-hospital-photo-goes-viral-of-nurses-praying-together-before-their-shift/273-0c55cab5-a784-4705-ac0d-e4658687367a>
<https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/meditation-sessions-for-doctors-suffering-from-burnout/2211543/>
2. <https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/03/the-covid-19-crisis-too-few-are-talking-about-health-care-workers-mental-health/>