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# fact sheet

## FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS: COPING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, communities have come together to support essential workers on the front lines, especially health care workers. In this context, the term “health care worker” refers to anyone delivering direct or indirect care and services to those impacted by COVID-19. This fact sheet offers ways to cope with feelings of stress and anxiety brought on by a national public health emergency.

### CHALLENGES AFFECTING HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

**Increased demand for care.** Hospitals are overwhelmed with the need for patient care. Fewer staff may be available due to illness or caring for family members.

**Managing the ongoing risk of infection.** Health care workers must manage fear and anxiety regarding the risk of contracting the illness and the possibility of passing it on to family members or friends.

**Equipment shortages.** With the increase in demand for care, there are shortages of equipment, including personal protective equipment (PPE), in hospitals and clinics.

**Providing psychosocial support to patients along with medical care.** Health care workers are tasked with the additional challenge of providing on-the-spot emotional support for those impacted by the virus while simultaneously caring for their medical needs.

**Increased psychological stress.** During an outbreak, we see an increase in psychological stress for health care workers. They may experience feelings of fear, grief, anxiety, depression, guilt, anger and exhaustion.

### RECOGNIZING STRESS RESPONSES

Stress and anxiety can cause reactions in the body that affect our behavior, our emotions and our physical well-being. This is called secondary traumatic stress. Identifying common stress reactions can allow for more efficient coping.

Under normal circumstances, most individuals experience stress-related symptoms and then “bounce back.” However, stress reactions become problematic when they last too long and interfere with daily life. The list below contains many, but not all, of the common responses to stress:

- **Physical:** headaches, weight changes, gastrointestinal issues, sweating, chronic fatigue or sleep disturbances and increased heart rate
- **Emotional:** feeling heroic, euphoric or invulnerable, denial, anxiety, fear, depression, guilt, apathy and grief
- **Behavioral:** changes in activity level, difficulty communicating or listening, irritability; including angry outbursts, inability to rest or relax, frequent crying, excessive worrying and social withdrawal
- **Cognitive:** memory problems, difficulty making decisions and difficulty concentrating

Recognizing whether you are experiencing a few, some or many of these responses can help you monitor how you are coping. Remember that these are extraordinary circumstances: it is normal to experience difficulties and to ask for help.

## HOW TO SUPPORT YOURSELF

Under extreme stress, workers often prioritize their patients' health over their own, leading to additional feelings of burnout. They may endure long shifts without breaks, lack of PPE, extraordinary caseloads and isolation from their loved ones. Keeping these challenges in mind, here are some additional strategies that may help.

**Meet basic human needs.** While it seems simple, eating well, drinking plenty of water and getting adequate sleep allows you to cope with higher levels of stress. Basic needs also include grocery shopping and other errands. If you are able, delegate these tasks to someone in your network. Some stores have also extended hours for health care workers and first responders.

**Conduct self check-ins.** Check in with yourself regularly to monitor both physical and emotional well-being. If you are experiencing prolonged stress responses, talk to a peer or supervisor or seek professional help.

**Take breaks.** When possible, it is important to take breaks from direct patient care. Focusing on a task unrelated to work can decrease feelings of anxiety and burnout. Take a walk, listen to music or call a friend. Recognize that proper patient care cannot occur without first taking care of yourself.

**Connect with colleagues.** There will be few that understand the entirety of your experience as a health care worker. Connecting to those that you work with can decrease feelings of anxiety and increase a sense of camaraderie.

**Stay in touch with family.** Sharing your experience and connecting with loved ones when possible can lead to a stronger support system outside of your work environment.

**Limit media exposure.** While it is important to stay updated on the current news, overexposure to media can increase feelings of stress and anxiety.

**Employ coping strategies.** Try to recall what has worked for you during high-stress times in the past. Between shifts, make sure to get adequate rest, eat well and connect with your social network. Ask your employer about access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or other mental health resources.

Many parts of the world are under incredible stress due to the pandemic, and your role places you at the epicenter of helping others, sometimes with resistance or lack of appreciation. Know that many respect and admire your efforts everywhere and that the end may be within sight.

## COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY

In oncology, patients and health care professionals are used to a certain level of uncertainty. However, the introduction of a global pandemic has created a new degree of ambiguity that can be difficult to cope with. Mindfulness exercises, meditation, physical exercise, journaling and creative expression can allow you to feel more grounded in the present moment. In times of uncertainty, it can be helpful to identify factors that you have control over instead of focusing on what is out of your control. Though the days are long, this situation won't last forever. Your contributions are changing lives.

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