

5 resources built to provide emotional support in times of crisis

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Unprecedented challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic raises concern about well-being and stress. Physicians and other health professionals on the front lines of COVID-19 care often experience higher levels of stress, placing a heavy burden on their shoulders. With a focus on well-being, Henry Ford Health System in Detroit continues to add valuable emotional support resources to support their teams.

“The most critical issue is supporting our staff and team members and physicians and ensuring that they have the support that they need—certainly emotional and psychological support is one of the most critical issues because, frankly, our staff is dealing with more death than they normally deal with,” said Wright L. Lassiter III, president and CEO of Henry Ford Health System in Michigan, during one of the AMA’s daily COVID-19 video updates.

Expanding on the conversation, Henry Ford’s Director of Physician Wellness Lisa MacLean, MD, spoke with the AMA about resources the system provides for emotional support during this public health emergency.

Emotional support hotline

Knowing there is a need for 24/7 access to mental health professionals, Dr. MacLean and her team worked to create a COVID-19 Employee Emotional Support Hotline at Henry Ford, an AMA Health System Program Partner.?

“We had a division within psychiatry that does what is called neuropsychology and they do a lot of face-to-face testing with patients who have had brain injuries or a variety of different things,” she said. “All of them were going to be furloughed because they couldn’t deliver the type of care that they normally deliver, but they’re all mental health professionals” and they were able to “redeploy them into other jobs to create these resources for our employees.”

The emotional support hotline is managed by the psychologists around the clock, providing support for physicians and other health professionals across Henry Ford with a diverse group of people calling in throughout the day.

Employee assistance program

While availability of the employee assistance program is not new, it has been adjusted to meet the changing needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Again, what we did is we had a shifting of behavioral health staff within our organization,” said Dr. MacLean. “We were able to redeploy five additional staff into EAP from behavioral health to help meet the demand.”

“We were also able to use those staff and psychiatric residents to help streamline medication evaluations of employees,” she said. “In addition to seeing the therapist, the same day they were able to get a medication evaluation really quickly because we actually dedicated people’s time in order to be available so that we could really provide support to our docs and to all of our workers.”

Daily virtual support groups

Online support groups meet three times a day, seven days a week to account for varying availability of physicians and other health professionals. Redeploying behavioral health and health psychology individuals, two facilitators are available for every group, which has an average of 16 people.

“In addition to just doing this using Zoom three times a day, we’ve also reached out to targeted groups and said, ‘Hey, we will do a support group for you guys as well,’” said Dr. MacLean. “Last week we did one just for the residents and we did one just for the advanced practice providers.”

Additionally, the team reached out to the midnight shift and held their first session at 1 a.m., with another one planned.

“Instead of just saying here is this resource, we’re trying to actually be proactive and reaching out to groups to let people know that if they want us to do a group and meet with them, we’re happy to do that,” she said.

Crisis response team

If a team needs emotional support after a traumatic event, Henry Ford’s crisis response team is available around the clock to schedule a virtual group intervention. At the request of a department, two members of the crisis team will join to discuss the critical event that has occurred.

For example, while not related to COVID-19, an employee died in a car accident, which was traumatic for everyone in the department.

“Grieving is really weird right now because all the traditions that we typically have, we can’t have currently,” said Dr. MacLean. “We can’t have funerals and we can’t touch people. It’s really a strange time that we’re living in.”

Leadership resources

A unique resource at Henry Ford is their well-being resources for leadership across the organization to help not only themselves but their teams too.

“We recognized early on that we needed to invest in our leaders,” said Dr. MacLean. “Early on we developed a psychological first aid for leaders learning module that we assigned to all leaders so that they could learn about how to provide psychological first aid and how to have these conversations in a supportive way.”

While the daily support groups were successful, Dr. MacLean found that not many leaders were attending. To overcome this, a group dedicated to COVID-19 conversations with leaders was created. The group meets three times a week and covers a different topic each time, including grief, loss, teamwork, building resilience and self-care for leaders.

“This is a marathon, not a sprint, and even though we put these resources together, we’re never going to get to post COVID,” said Dr. MacLean. “There’s going to be an extended recovery period and health care organizations need to also be investing in not just thinking about what we need to do in the immediate, but what we need to do over the next six months to a year to begin the healing and recovery process.”

The AMA offers resources to help physicians manage their own mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The AMA also provides resources for health care leaders on caring for our caregivers during COVID-19.

Additionally, the AMA is offering two free surveys to help health care organizations monitor the impact COVID-19 has on their workforce during this pandemic. The surveys can be used to track trends in stress levels, identify specific drivers of stress, and develop supportive infrastructures based on these drivers. Organizations that use the surveys will receive free-of-charge support from the AMA in launching the surveys and access to data through an easy-to-use reporting dashboard.

Learn more with the AMA about five ways that health care organizations can effectively address physician anxiety during COVID-19.

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