

What doctors wish patients knew about pandemic fatigue

JAN 29, 2021

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At this point in the pandemic, people are tired of being cooped up due to restrictions on indoor gatherings outside the home. They are also tired of wearing masks, physical distancing, being away from family and friends, and increasingly fed up with the “new normal” routines. People are experiencing a type of burnout that experts are calling COVID-19 fatigue, which can lead to careless behaviors and a sharp rise in cases.

Two AMA members took time to discuss how doctors can best help patients overcome COVID-19 fatigue and stay safe. They are:

- Carl Lambert, MD, assistant professor of family medicine and director of the Family Medicine Leadership Program at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago.
- Anna Yap, MD, a third-year resident in the UCLA-Ronald Reagan/Olive View emergency medicine program. Dr. Yap is the previous member-at-large of the AMA Resident and Fellow Section Governing Council, and the current AMA Senior Digital Fellow.

Drs. Lambert and Yap are also members of the AMA Ambassador Program, which equips individuals with the skills and knowledge to confidently speak to the AMA's initiatives and the value of membership. The program also increases overall awareness about what the AMA does for physicians and their patients.

Here is what these physician experts had to say.

Recognize signs of COVID fatigue

One aspect is “being excessively tired despite adequate rest. Even if you’re getting eight hours, you just feel like you’re dragging through the day and it’s hard to find the pearls in the mud,” said Dr. Lambert. Additionally, “if you have increased isolation from loved ones, co-workers and people who

you used to have bonds with, burnout and fatigue can make you feel like those things aren't really worth it anymore.

"Then, probably the most noteworthy one, at least for me as a professional, is a sense of ineffectiveness in life," he said. "Those three things make a really dangerous combination because it can make your fatigue turn to maladaptive behavior."

Seek mental health care

"Mental health has been suffering and it's partly that loss of social connection, but it also stinks to be inside all the time, and it makes sense that COVID fatigue is hitting," said Dr. Yap. "This is a completely normal thing to experience, so if you need to seek mental health care resources, do that too."

"I don't want patients to feel silly—it's a very common phenomenon," said Dr. Lambert. "We just have to figure out how you navigate this in a way that you stay strong and resilient and that you don't do anything that's reckless for yourself or the people around you."

Find ways to have community

It is important to "find ways to stay connected," said Dr. Yap. "For me, I'm lucky in that I like playing computer games and I have friends who I play computer games with.

"We're on voice chat together and talking to each other while playing video games, so I still have that sense of community there," she added. "Finding a way to still establish community with somebody or some folks somehow electronically is important."

Discover eight coronavirus tips that doctors wish patients would follow.

Maintain hope

With COVID-19 fatigue, "you're tired in your soul—emotionally, psychologically, socially, spiritually, you are just tired and not motivated," said Dr. Lambert. "To get out of that fatigue, maintain hope that things will get better."

"That feeds into what's happening nowadays with the vaccine and all these other avenues that are providing hope," he said. "If there's anything that you can do to maintain hope, that's really the way to

go.”

Create a schedule

With “COVID fatigue you feel like a dog that's just paddling in the pool, not really knowing where you're going,” said Dr. Yap. “When you lose those routines in life, you lose a lot of your momentum and the feeling that you're growing.”

“As humans, we like to have something we're moving towards and when we don't even know when the end point of something is, how can we move towards it?” she said, adding that one way is to change from pajamas into clothes or move from the bedroom to the living room to “help you feel like you have some sort of change that you're experiencing throughout the day.”

Focus on what you can control

“Even if we're in a world right now where it seems like everything is just lost and turned upside down, pick one or two things that you have control of,” said Dr. Lambert. “For me, personally, that's been my fitness. My wife and I made a little gym in our kitchen and that was our workout space.

“We would put it on our calendars, and we knew despite our schedules there was a half-hour block that we could control,” he added. “It's about having hope and then also saying: OK, the decisions I'm making now are going to make me more resilient and stronger for when this pandemic is over.”

Practice positive affirmation

“We're literally doing the best that we can, and we don't always give ourselves credit—we tend to move towards the negative,” said Dr. Lambert, adding that it is important to “think about the good things you are doing.”

“It really comes down to: I'm showing up, I have compassion in my heart and I'm doing the best that I can,” he said. “Even though we're fatigued, there are some things that we should still be grateful for.”

Read about four habits of gratitude physicians can follow to enhance well-being.

Set boundaries for social media

Patients should also “be careful with social media,” said Dr. Lambert. “Even as a doctor, I have to be careful or I can be guilty of doing the scrolling where I start looking at the bad news.”

“Be careful about how much social media you consume and then go into sources that, again, will provide you hope,” he said. “That could be limiting it, going to select pages or just having someone that you’re accountable to as far as how much you consume.”

Continue to follow preventive measures

While there are COVID-19 vaccines, they are 94% and 95% effective, which means there is still a 5% chance for infection. It is also unclear whether vaccination prevents transmission. This is why wearing a mask remains important.

“We want this to come to an end and we know that the best way to do that is to do it in a safe and measured manner,” said Dr. Lambert. “That comes with proper education and just following the science.

“Even though you got the vaccine, there's still that window where you're susceptible to becoming infected with COVID-19,” he added.

“Until everybody gets vaccinated, we probably can't loosen up our mask-wearing” or physical distancing, said Dr. Yap.

The AMA has developed frequently-asked-questions documents on COVID-19 vaccination covering safety, allocation and distribution, administration and more. There are two FAQs, one designed to answer patients’ questions, and another to address physicians’ COVID-19 vaccine questions.