Managing mental health during COVID-19

What physicians can do to address the mental and behavioral health care needs within their practices

During a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is common for everyone to experience increased levels of distress and anxiety, particularly as a result of social isolation. Physicians and other frontline health care professionals are made particularly vulnerable to negative mental health effects as they strive to balance the duty of caring for patients with concerns about their own well-being and that of their family and friends. The information provided below suggests strategies and points to resources for physicians to care for their own mental well-being while also caring for patients during the pandemic or any other crisis.

Take care of yourself

Airline safety briefings remind us to put on our own oxygen mask before helping others in the event of an emergency. Attending to your mental health and psychosocial well-being while caring for patients is as important as managing your physical health. Please refer to the resources in the Caring for our Caregivers during COVID-19 page for additional information.

1. Feel free to feel your feelings
   You and your colleagues are likely to feel immense pressure given potential surges in care demands, risk of infection, and equipment shortages, among other stressors. Experiencing stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a sign of weakness or a reflection on your ability to do your job.[1]

2. Intentionally employ coping strategies
   Put into practice strategies that have worked for you in the past during times of stress. These can include getting enough rest and finding respite time during work or between shifts, eating meals (ideally, healthy food, on a schedule), engaging in physical activity, and staying in contact (with appropriate social distancing) with family and friends.[2]

3. Perform regular check-ins with yourself
   Monitor yourself for symptoms of depression/stress disorder such as prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping, intrusive memories, and/or feelings of hopelessness. Talk to a trusted colleague or supervisor. Be open to seeking professional help if symptoms persist or worsen over time.[3]

4. Take breaks from the news and social media
   Make a regular habit of stepping away from your computer and smart phone from time to time. When returning online, focus on information from reputable sources, not just sources in your social media feed.[4] You don't have to take in everything produced by a 24/7 news cycle.

---

1. *Sources*: World Health Organization; Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
2. *Sources*: World Health Organization; Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
3. *Source*: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
4. *Source*: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

5. Be fortified by remembering the importance and meaning of your work
Remind yourself that despite the current challenges and frustrations, yours is a noble calling—taking care of those in need in a time of great uncertainty. Make sure to take time to recognize the efforts and sacrifices made by your colleagues.[5] Together, we are all stronger.

Take care of your staff

Leadership should strive to maintain critical infrastructure and have other support in place for staff during this time, knowing that this may require modifications to existing strategies, tactics and/or roles. Practices will want to protect, to the degree possible, staff from chronic stress and poor mental health, so that they are able to support patients and because it's the right thing to do. Please refer to AMA's Creating a Resilient Organization and Implementing a Work From-Home Program guides for additional suggestions and information.

1. Adjust staffing procedures and schedules (where possible)
When able and within applicable legal limits, rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions. Partner workers with less experience with more experienced colleagues, who can provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety practices. Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member impacted by the outbreak.[6]

2. Offer access to psychosocial support
Provide staff responding to the outbreak with access to sources of psychosocial support, making this as much of a priority as ensuring their physical safety.[7]

3. Monitor and review staff member well-being
Regularly and supportively monitor well-being and psychosocial status of staff to identify risks, emerging issues and adaptively respond to their needs.[8]

4. Create an environment of open communication
Encourage staff to speak openly about their concerns. Provide brief, regular forums to update staff on the status of the practice and how management is addressing challenges. Provide mechanisms for staff to express their concerns, ask questions, and encourage peer-support amongst colleagues.[9] For individual concerns related to one's mental health and well-being, encourage communication with trusted colleagues in addition to accessing your employee assistance program.

Take care of your patients

Mental health and psychosocial considerations should be integrated into all response activities. Please refer to the AMA's strategic practice guides and BHI Collaborative's BHI Compendium for additional suggestions and information on how to integrate mental and behavioral health care into your practice.

1. Establish a system to identify and provide care for mental health conditions
Ideally, every health care practice already has or can put in place a system (along with at least one staff member trained) to identify and provide care for patients with common and severe mental health conditions during this time.[10] This is particularly important since the stigma associated with mental health may cause

---

5. *Source*: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
6. *Source*: World Health Organization
7. *Source*: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychological Support
8. *Source*: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychological Support
9. *Source*: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychological Support
10. *Source*: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychological Support

patients to be reluctant in seeking support for both COVID-19 and any mental health condition(s).[11] Also, previously stable individuals may become less stable. Employ telemedicine to deliver care where appropriate, particularly given the relaxation of requirements by HHS, among others.[12] Reach out to your state medical association/society for more detailed information and resources on licensure, coverage, and payment policies.

2. Facilitate additional training for frontline staff

As time and resources permit, frontline workers should have training on basic psychosocial care principles and psychological first aid. Online training may be used if it is not possible to train staff in person due to remote or distributed work, limited time, and/or concern about the risk of infection.[13]

3. Verify referral pathways

Confirm the status of established referral pathways for patients with mental health conditions and that all staff responding to the outbreak are aware of and use such system(s) if/when needed.[14] If no such pathways exist, reach out to local organizations such as state departments of health and medical societies for guidance and recommendations for resources.

4. Provide clear understandable communication to patients

Use "plain English" in messages with patients, particularly those with intellectual, cognitive and psychosocial disabilities and employ approaches to communication that do not rely solely on written information where possible.[15]

5. Incorporate guidance about stress into general care practices

Emotional distress and anxiety are common during pandemics such as the COVID-19 outbreak. It is important to help patients acknowledge that stress exists and help normalize it. Basic strategies can be used to teach them how to recognize signs of distress (such as worry, fear, insomnia, etc.) and when discussing ways to reduce them (e.g., healthy diet, exercise, talking to loved ones, meditation, etc.).[16] Additional forms of treatment, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, can also be effective.[17]

11. *Source*: World Health Organization
12. Sources: Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services; Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
13. Source: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychological Support
14. Sources: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychological Support; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
15. Sources: World Health Organization; Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
16. Source: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
17. Source: American Psychological Association

Appendix: Mental and behavioral health resources for COVID-19

1. Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations During COVID-19 Outbreak
This resource summarizes mental health considerations for health care workers (#7-11) and leaders/managers of health facilities (#12-17) to support mental and psychosocial well-being during the COVID-19 outbreak.
Source: World Health Organization

2. Briefing Note on Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak
This briefing note summarizes key mental health and psychosocial support considerations in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak. Included are key implementation activities (pg. 10) and specific messaging that can be used by health care leaders and frontline workers responding to the COVID-19 outbreak (pg. 15-16).
Source: Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group for Mental Health and Psychological Support in Emergency Settings

3. Supporting Families of Healthcare Workers Exposed to COVID-19
This resource details several strategies to help families of healthcare workers cope with increasing distress and concerns related to COVID-19.
Source: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

4. Managing Healthcare Workers' Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak
This resource details various institutional support and self-care strategies for monitoring and assessing the mental health and wellbeing of healthcare workers, in addition to ensuring their successful reintegration in the event of infection.
Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

5. Provider Self-Care Toolkit
This toolkit provides assessment tools, strategies, and resources to help reduce the effects of job-related stress, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress for healthcare providers working with those who have experienced trauma or have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

6. For Providers and Community Leaders: Helping People Manage Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak
This resources details five key principles for health care providers (and others) concerned with the psychological welfare of the public to follow when providing help in situations like the COVID-19 outbreak. It also lists concrete steps health care providers can take to maximize public trust, foster social connections, support community and individual well-being, and promote adaptive behavior change.
Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

7. Coronavirus and Mental Health: Taking Care of Ourselves During Infectious Disease Outbreak
This resource provides recommendations on how health care workers, whose patients are affected by the outbreak, can help take care of themselves. Additionally, it outlines meaningful steps patients and their families can take to protect themselves during an infectious disease outbreak like COVID-19.
Source: American Psychiatric Association

8. Sustaining the well-being of healthcare personnel during coronavirus and other infectious disease outbreaks
This resource provides guidance to health care workers on how to take care of themselves and encourage others to practice self-care in order to sustain the ability to care for those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

9. Fight COVID-19 with Better Sleep Health: A Guide for Hospital Workers
This resource provides steps hospital workers can take during the COVID-19 pandemic to use sleep as a tool to help fight potential infections and maintain their overall health and performance.
Source: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

10. Caring for patients' mental well-being during coronavirus and other emerging infectious diseases: A guide for clinicians
This resource provides guidance to clinicians on how to promote patients' mental well-being during the COVID-19 outbreak.
Source: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

11. Psychological Effects of Quarantine During the Coronavirus Outbreak: What Healthcare Providers Need to Know
This resource details the psychological effects of quarantine, as well as strategies for how health care providers can care for their patients' and their own mental well-being during periods of quarantine.
Source: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

12. Notifying Families After A COVID-19 Death
This resource outlines actions that can help facilitate the healing process for family members dealing with the difficult process of death notification under the very complicated circumstances surrounding COVID-19.
Source: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress