

Physicians, nurses, and other healthcare workers currently face multiple challenges to fulfill their duty to care for patients, including the fear of getting infected or infecting others, stigma, increased emotional distress in patients, and increased workload. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience of distress is a normal reaction. The following tips may support healthcare workers to stay healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic, or other epidemics and pandemics you may face in your professional practice.

10 TIPS FOR SELF-CARE

1. RECEIVE TRAINING

(CSTS, 2020; WHO, 2018; 2020)

Participate in professional training to be prepared for your professional role and responsibilities during the pandemic. This may include a refresher training on infection prevention and control, as well as how to assess, triage, test, and treat patients with COVID-19. Healthcare professionals should be aware of the symptoms of COVID-19, how COVID-19 is transmitted and how they can protect themselves.

2. TAKE TIME FOR HEALTHY HABITS

(AMA, 2020; CDC, 2020; CSTS, 2020; WHO, 2018)

During stressful times, it is important to eat, drink and sleep enough to be able to care for others. Avoid use of alcohol, other drugs, or excessive amounts of prescribed medicine, which interfere with sleep and recovery. Take care of your body and exercise daily. If possible, go outside for a walk and get some sunlight.

3. ENGAGE IN ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES

(CDC, 2020; CSTS, 2020)

Allow yourself to do something unrelated to work that you find comforting, fun or relaxing. Use time for comforting and fun activities, e.g., taking a walk, listening to music or a podcast, or talking with a friend.

4. TAKE TIME FOR DAILY RELAXATION

(CDC, 2020; CSTS, WHO, 2020)

When possible, maintain appropriate working hours with breaks. To help others, you need to take care of yourself. Use time for relaxing activities to calm down and to improve your concentration. Implement breathing exercises such as deep and slow breaths into your daily routine at a particular time.

5. CONNECT WITH COLLEAGUES

(CSTS, 2020; WHO, 2018)

Increase communication with others and seek social support to prevent being isolated with your worries. Access peer support programs, speak to your colleagues and line manager, and seek regular supervision. Discuss the emotional and social challenges of caring for patients with others.

6. CONNECT WITH LOVED ONES AND COMMUNITY GROUPS

(CDC, 2020; CSTS, 2020)

Get in touch with your loved ones via internet-based communications systems, social media and phone and share your experience. This connection may help you to avoid isolation and promote the feeling of being supported emotionally for you and your loved ones. Meaningful and pleasant connection with others may provide emotional support and promote your well-being.

7. STAY INFORMED BY TRUSTED SOURCES

(CSTS, 2020)

Coronavirus is a highly discussed topic. Rely on trusted sources of information, such as the World Health Organization or public health agencies.

8. LIMIT MEDIA EXPOSURE

(AMA, 2020; CDC, 2020; CSTS, 2020)

Avoid relying on media information without a scientific basis or that are not reports from official agencies. Limit watching, reading, or listening to news and stories from unreliable media sources, such as Facebook or other social media. They can increase fear and anxiety.

9. MONITOR YOUR HEALTH

(CSTS, 2020)

Monitor yourself over time for any symptoms of depression or stress-related disorders, such as sadness, sleep disturbance, intrusive memories, hopelessness, moral distress or moral injury[1]. If you experience such symptoms, seek support from a colleague, supervisor, counselor, or emotional regulation techniques and corresponding online resources.

10. REDUCE PERCEIVED STIGMA

(APA, 2020; CDC, 2020; IASC, 2020)

If you have been exposed to someone who has been infected, you may feel stigmatized by others who fear being infected when interacting with you. Talk with your colleagues and others about stigmatization to share your concerns and to receive social support.

[1] Moral injury is defined as the psychological distress which results from an act of transgression, which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth.

5 TIPS FOR PATIENT CARE

As a healthcare worker, you might care for patients who are experiencing emotional distress about the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on their families. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the emotional distress patients are currently experiencing and to provide adequate support. Establishing a sense of safety, connectedness, and hope, as well as paying attention to practical needs and promoting active coping might be helpful for patients.

1. IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT HIGH-RISK PATIENTS

(CDC, 2020; CSTS, 2020)

Patients with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with treatment, as they may experience aggravated symptoms. Patients with trauma exposure or other symptoms perceived as uncontrollable may be particularly vulnerable. More frequent contact than usual can be helpful for high-risk patients. Ensure that patients have adequate supplies of medications.

2. KEEP PATIENTS INFORMED

(ECDC, 2020; WHO, 2020)

Provide or reinforce accurate infection prevention and control and public health information, including for concerned people who have neither symptoms nor risk. Obtain the latest information about the outbreak from credible public health resources, such as the World Health Organization or public health agencies, to provide accurate information to your patients.

3. EDUCATE PATIENTS

(AMA, 2020; APA, 2020; CSTS, 2020; ECDC, 2020)

Inform patients about stress reactions, as emotional distress is common in the context of uncertain and potentially life-threatening situations. Correct patients' misconceptions about COVID-19 and inform them about credible public health resources to promote accurate appraisals of risk. Advise patients to limit exposure to social media that focuses on stressful news about the COVID-19 pandemic. Proactively address potential stigma by promoting a sense of solidarity in the population.

4. DISCUSS STRATEGIES TO REDUCE DISTRESS

(AMA, 2020; CDC, 2020; CSTS, 2020; ECDC, 2020; WHO, 2018)

Discuss strategies to reduce distress, which includes self-care strategies, such as maintaining a healthy diet, exercise and sleep regime; staying connected with friends, family and other networks via internet-based communications systems, social media and phone; talking to loved ones about feelings and concerns; and engaging in enjoyable activities. Inform patients about online self-help resources as well as mental health services available online during the pandemic.

5. REFER TO SPECIALIZED MENTAL HEALTH CARE

(CSTS, 2020)

If a patient is experiencing severe emotional distress or has mental health issues, refer to specialized mental healthcare.

REFERENCES

- AMA (2020). Managing mental health during COVID-19. Chicago, IL: American Medical Association.
- APA (2020). Combating Bias and Stigma Related to COVID-19. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- CDC (2020). Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Stress and Coping. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- CSTS (2020). Sustaining the Well-Being of Healthcare Personnel during Coronavirus and other Infectious Disease Outbreaks. Bethesda, MD: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress.
- CSTS (2020). Taking Care of Patients During the Coronavirus Outbreak: A Guide for Psychiatrists. Bethesda, MD: Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress.
- ECDC (2020). Considerations relating to social distancing measures in response to COVID-19 – second update. Stockholm, Sweden: European Center for Disease Prevention and Control.
- WHO (2018). Occupational safety and health in public health emergencies: A manual for protecting health workers and responders. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.
- WHO (2020). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak: rights, roles and responsibilities of health workers, including key considerations for occupational safety and health. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.