



Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Healthcare Provider: Take care of your 'MEPS' (Mental, Emotional, Physical, Social health)

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation. Feelings of isolation, uncertainty, fatigue, and a loss of control have created stress among individuals across the world. Healthcare providers are in a position where they must balance their personal, familial, and work obligations during the pandemic. As frontline workers, healthcare providers are particularly vulnerable to the physical, mental, emotional, and social stressors encountered during crises. This can contribute to burn out, physical illnesses, and dissatisfaction. It is therefore essential that healthcare providers are supported in acknowledging and normalizing these feelings, and accessing resources to help them cope. To maintain social distancing and provide around-the-clock services, there are a variety of online resources available to support healthcare providers during this time. By utilizing various coping skills and seeking support, healthcare providers can protect their mental, emotional, physical, and social (MEPS) health during the COVID-19 situation.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, pandemic, wellness, physical health, resilience



CME
Pre-test Quiz ?

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly taken a toll on our lives. Beyond the limitations on social gatherings, we are recognizing just how much our daily routines are being impacted. Schools have been closed, ceremonies cancelled, conferences postponed, etc. These changes, which feel like they occurred suddenly, have had major impacts on our well-being. Fears of food and essential needs becoming scarce have led to stock-piling of hygiene products in homes, and empty shelves in stores. Not being able to spend holidays and celebrations with loved ones has individuals feeling isolated. Managing daily



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routines which must now include working from home—while supervising children—has become a challenge for many.¹

The healthcare system has also taken an unprecedented hit. Hospitals and offices are dili-

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gently screening for symptoms that may be related to COVID-19. Virtual visits are being conducted to limit physical contact. Emergency rooms and hospitals are clearing the way for the ‘sickest’ patients. Healthcare providers are being redeployed to critical areas for service.

As healthcare providers, this can be very taxing on our mental, emotional, and physical, and social health (MEPS). Anxiety around catching COVID-19 while at work is a real fear—not only for our own health, but also for the safety of our patients and our families.²

Beyond that, healthcare providers are constantly aware that there is a shortage of personal protection equipment (PPE). How are we to care for patients

and protect ourselves and others if this is the case? Measures such as rationing the number of masks per shift have been implemented, and companies are working to provide PPE within a reasonable timeframe. However, this is only one concern among many. Another issue that is raised is how to navigate around redeployment—the possibility that one may be asked to work at a different location or unit to assist with the COVID-19 crisis. How would we manage our schedules, our familial responsibilities, etc?

Long shifts, along with the potential to be exposed to COVID-19 and ill patients, can distance us even more socially. Feeling worried about our work, health, and families is challenging. Physically, we may be exhausted, hungry, endure sleepless nights, and feel tense in our bodies.

We want to be there for our patients and family members—but what happens when we, as healthcare providers, need support?

There has been a positive shift in recognizing that healthcare provider wellness is essential. In the time of the COVID-19 crisis, this is even more essential. The CDC has resources dedicated for healthcare providers, parents, and the general public that can aid in coping with this challenging time.⁴ The WHO has also published a document outlining the importance of taking care



Figure 1: Ottawa Public Health: Mental Health during COVID-19

Take Care of Your Mental Health, too!



Taken from <https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/mental-health-and-covid-19.aspx>

of our health during COVID-19.⁵ Even more general resources for healthcare providers, such as hot-lines and services offered by the CMA⁶ can be incredibly useful. Figure 1 depicts an image released by Ottawa Public Health in an effort to raise awareness that anxiety, distress, and feeling uneasy are normal during this time—and what to do about it. Another incredibly useful website is VirusAnxiety (<https://www.virusanxiety.com>), an initiative created by mental health experts (who also have an app, called Shine) that is dedicated to supporting people through the COVID-19 pandemic. It contains frequently asked questions about the virus and isolation, mental health strategies, coping tools, free meditations, and more. In addition, COVID-19 therapists

(<https://covid19therapists.com>) is a free, confidential therapy service offered to healthcare professionals during this time. Providers need not be suffering from a 'COVID-19-related crisis' to utilize this service—they can simply reach out if they want to talk to a professional about the uncertainty, changes, and challenges during the pandemic—and learn how to support themselves.

It is important that during this time, healthcare providers take care of themselves. We cannot care for others if we are not well. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that we are not alone in feeling anxious or stressed during the COVID-19 crisis. Normalizing these feelings is essential. When we acknowledge that our emotions are 'okay' and can accept



Figure 2: Tips for Coping with Stress

COVID-19 (coronavirus)

6 Tips for Coping with the Stress



It's normal to feel sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. Talking to people you trust can help. Get in touch with your loved ones and connect with them.



Be aware that not everything being said about COVID-19 is accurate. Go to trusted sources like your state or local health department, the CDC or the World Health Organization.



Limit your stress and fear by reducing how much time you spend watching or reading the news or scrolling through social media, especially when you feel it's upsetting information.



Do things you've done in the past to help manage challenges and stress. Know that you've developed skills to manage your emotions and use them during this time, too.



If you're staying home, stay healthy by eating well, getting plenty of sleep, exercising regularly and having good social contact with loved ones by phone or video chat.



Deal with your emotions in a healthy way. Have a plan ready in case you do start to feel overwhelmed, and don't hesitate to talk to a counselor or therapist if you need to.

*Created for Mission Health by Jarrod Phillips Cole & Hancock, Inc.

**Adapted from the International Federation of Red Cross, data from the World Health Organization

Taken from <https://blog.mission-health.org/2020/03/18/covid-19-tips-coping-stress-infographic/>



Figure 3: Coping Skill Toolbox

TYPES OF COPING SKILLS



Taken from <https://thrivetreatment.com/blog/2018/10/24/coping-skills-in-recovery/>

them, we feel safe to express our concerns and thoughts. Reaching out to sources of support—including coworkers, family members or friends, support groups, etc.—is critical. Although we may be physically distant from one another, we need not be socially and emotionally distant. Figure 2 is an example of tips offered to help us cope with this crisis.

Creative ideas to seek support can mean using phone or video

chats to speak with others. Utilizing services such as grocery delivery to our homes can save time in long line ups, or help us when we cannot make it in time to shop for our needs.

Tapping into our creative abilities is also important. We must find ways to cope with our stress. Strategies such as journaling, drawing, reading, knitting, baking, etc. can be incredible outlets for us. Of course, ensuring that we are eat-





SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a level of uncertainty, fear, and distress across the world. Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and stress are normal during this time.

Healthcare providers are, in particular, are faced with difficult decisions and situations in the COVID-19 crisis. Balancing personal, familial, and work obligations can be extremely challenging.

Mental, emotional, physical, and social health (MEPS) are equally important. As healthcare providers, we cannot take care of others if we do not care for ourselves first.

Various resources are available to help healthcare providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing and utilizing a range of coping tools can promote MEPS health.

ing, sleeping, and being physically active is of the utmost importance as well. Figure 3 contains categories of coping tools; the most important factor when determining how we will cope during stressful times is to find strategies that work for us.

In summary, although the COVID-19 pandemic presents as a challenging time for the entire world, we are not helpless or hopeless. Social distancing has made an impact on limiting the spread of the illness, and the bravery and commitment of healthcare providers during this time is admirable. Nonetheless, it is critical that as healthcare providers, we acknowledge the stress and burdens we feel at this time. Reflecting and being honest about our worries, fears, and exhaustion during the COVID-19 crisis allows us to understand that we are not alone. Seeking support from others, keeping ourselves safe, and

using creative outlets to manage our stress can help us cope. Finally, maintaining a sense of hope is crucial—we have all been through extremely difficult times before, and we have survived. We will survive this, too.

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