



Managing Stress and Building Resilience for Health Care Workers During COVID-19

Health care workers across the country are experiencing incredible amounts of stress during this difficult time.

As health care workers, we all commit to provide the highest quality care for our patients, and we have a deep desire for our patients to be healthy. Yet, when there is so much illness and so much uncertainty about what will come and when it will end, it is natural that many of us will experience stress and anxiety despite our best attempts at coping.

Why Does COVID-19 Feel so Stressful?

As a health care worker, you are used to coping with stress. To be qualified for your job, you endured high-intensity training. You are used to working long hours. You always care for sick people. You are good at making hard decisions. But for some reason, COVID-19 feels different.

Why is that?

There are several specific stressors that you are likely experiencing that are different from your normal challenges:

1. **Need to Employ Personal Safety Measures**

Being constantly vigilant about handwashing and sanitizing the world around you is exhausting. The use of PPE is cumbersome, tiring, and can lead to excess body heat and dehydration.

2. **Risk of Disease Transmission**

Infection control is hard. People are symptom-free for long periods but are still contagious, which can increase anxiety when we are around others. The mortality rate is higher with COVID-19 than the flu or other more common contagious illnesses, so it is scarier to us and our patients. Plus, there are constantly changing guidelines and rules to follow.

3. **Multiple Personal Demands**

Some of us are juggling changes at home, including partners working from home and children out of school/daycare, some of whom need to be homeschooled or require additional support during this time. Family members may have lost jobs or been furloughed resulting in financial hardships.

Health care teams may be short-staffed as team members are absent due to illness.

Health care workers may be assigned to areas of the system that are new to them, resulting in the challenge of learning new skills or feeling underprepared.

4. Physical and Emotional Isolation/Strained Relationships

You may feel you are unable to express your fears and emotional needs since you are a health care worker, who is “supposed to be strong”.

Many of us are not able to see family members and friends who typically serve as a source of emotional support.

Some of us have difficult relationships with partners within our homes and having more time together may exacerbate some of the stress in those relationships.

What Is Resilience?

Psychologists define resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, threats, or serious sources of stress. Resilience offers us the opportunity to “bounce back” from difficult life experiences and even experience personal growth in the midst of them.

During this pandemic, many of us are facing personal and professional challenges and trauma. It is essential to build resilience in ourselves and encourage the development of resilience in our loved ones.

But, how do we do that?

1. Foster Personal Wellness

Remember, you must be well in order to care for others. Healthy lifestyle factors can strengthen your body to adapt to stress. Make sure you are getting adequate rest. Take brief self-care breaks when needed throughout the day.

Consider your nutrition. Be sure to eat and strive to fuel your body with nutrient-dense foods and drink your water!

Exercise as often as possible. Not only is exercise good for your physical health, but during exercise, our brains release dopamine and endocannabinoids that can generate a natural high and result in decreased stress.

Strive to maintain a routine. When the world feels out of order, maintaining a sense of control over your daily schedule can be very comforting.

Engage in calming activities like yoga, meditation, mindfulness, or journaling.

2. Stay Connected

While practicing social distancing, remain connected to loved ones and friends, through social media, telephone, email, or videoconferencing platforms.

Stay connected to health care colleagues who can understand your unique challenges. Most likely, they are experiencing some of the same anxiety and stress that you are. Share your story with them and ask them to share their experiences with you. It helps to remember that we are all in this together.

If you are a person of faith, consider scheduling some time to focus on prayer, studying scripture, or other spiritual activities that help you stay connected to your beliefs/values.

3. Cultivate Healthy Thoughts

Resist the desire to consume too much media. Your newsfeed may be full of sensational articles about COVID-19 or politics. Spending too much time taking in news can increase anxiety. Instead, choose to limit your exposure to only certain reliable sources and reduce the amount of “mental bandwidth” you will dedicate to it (e.g., CDC website, local health department reports).

Be here now. When you are at work, be all in. When you are at home, be there fully. Practice mindfulness throughout your day by noticing when your mind is drifting to an anxious thought and bringing it back to the present moment.

Engage in positive self-talk. If you catch yourself having a negative internal dialogue (such as: “I’m selfish to be afraid to go to work”), stop and ask yourself if you would speak to a friend in this manner. If the answer is “no”, replace that thought with something true and kind.

Practice gratitude! Each day, spend a few moments intentionally stopping and thinking about what you have to be thankful for. Even in the most difficult seasons, we all have much for which we can be thankful. Multiple studies have shown that gratitude increases mental strength, helps people experience more happiness, and reduces depression.

4. Look for Ways to Grow

Reconnect with old hobbies or find a new one.

Focus on others. It is easy to become overwhelmed when we are always looking at our own problems. Try focusing on the needs of others and how you can help meet those needs. Maybe call a shut-in neighbor to be a source of support or offer to run an errand or do a household chore. Attending to the needs of others provides us with a sense of meaning and purpose.

Consider moving toward your goals. COVID-19 will not last forever. Keep working on that weight loss goal or planning that Disney vacation. You may have to adjust your timeline, but it is important to keep working toward goals that are important to you.

Reflect on ways in which you are growing as a result of this struggle. Perhaps you are getting more quality time with your children or learning how adaptable you are in the face of stress. Acknowledge and name these areas of personal growth.

Source: Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare System