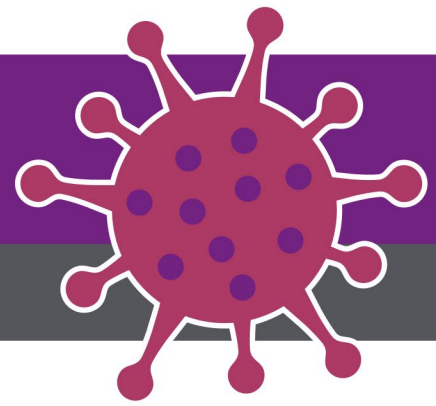


CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19)

Coping with COVID-19: Tips and Strategies to Assist in Coping



Audience: All Colleagues

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Tips and Strategies to Assist in Coping with COVID-19

Why are Healthcare providers uniquely at risk? Healthcare providers are the direct frontline in combating the spread and impact of COVID-19. Besides the obvious consequences of stress incurred in going towards rather than away from a feared situation, there are direct and indirect challenges to wellness. The demands of medical care result in competing demands of caring for patients, your own family and friends and yourself. In addition, those called to serve in healthcare are strongly committed to service and altruism, all of which may place you at risk for minimizing your own distress in order to care for others.

Differentiate helpful and problematic stress: *It's okay to feel stressed!* Anxiety and stress are normal, expected reactions to crisis. In manageable amounts, stress can serve to increase focus, allow for clear prioritization of needs and protect resources. However, when stress peaks and hits the 'turning point', it can lead to physical and emotional distress. It may be harder to identify your emotional distress so check in with physical symptoms (muscle tension, hand tremors, poor appetite, sweating palms) which may better reveal your stress level. If you notice any of these things, please reach out for support!

Peer support: *It's okay to ask for help!* Anxiety is a normal human response and is indicative that you care about your job and take it seriously. This is a difficult time. Research indicates that peer support is instrumental in surmounting these barriers and allowing healthcare workers to give and receive the support they need. If asking for help is hard, then clearly it takes strength do so. By reaching out to peers, you can change the culture within your team and department.

Ask for professional support: *It's okay to need professional support!* Although the focus in traumatic situations is on the individual at the center of the trauma (in this context, the patient); others involved in the situation can also experience the effects of that trauma, including medical providers treating the patient. During or in the immediate aftermath of a trauma, healthcare providers and first responders are at risk for acute stress symptoms which include hypervigilance (startle reflex), feeling irritable and/or unable to feel happy, recurrent thoughts or intrusive images of the trauma or considerable efforts to avoid thinking of the trauma. If you experience any of these symptoms, please reach out to your manager or human resources for additional support.

Grounding: *It's okay to pause!* Utilize each of your five senses to ground yourself in the moment (What am I seeing? What am I hearing? What am I feeling?). This can be done at the beginning or end of your shift as a transition point, it can be done before or after walking into a patient room to center yourself or at any point you feel yourself losing connection to the immediate present.

Focus on what is in your control: *It's okay to separate what you can and cannot control!* Differentiate aspects that are within your control and those that are not. Behaviors are often easier to control than thoughts and emotions so focusing on doing something in the present can be helpful. Select one small task that is do-able and will promote a sense of accomplishment.

Labeling: *It's okay to think about your feelings!* It may sound simple, but the act of labeling how you feel can be powerful in anchoring you within your experience rather than leaving you feeling overwhelmed. An important distinction to make is to identify it as an emotion. Notice the ways the following two statements sound different: "I am scared" versus "I am feeling scared." In the first phrase, the emotion becomes your identity whereas in the second, it implies that is an emotion, something transient and change-able. Try checking in with yourself several times a day with the following prompt: "I am currently feeling....."

Focus on the present moment: *It's okay to redirect to the present!* At times within healthcare settings, it may be necessary to attempt to predict scenarios, which may occur in order to better able implement the appropriate response if it does. There are also times the sense of being on autopilot and responding based on training and instinct, also seems beneficial in acute medical events. However, it is important to recognize when the 'what ifs' are no longer productive and instead increase anxiety. Offer opportunities to be in the present by feeling the sensation of pushing your feet into the floor, slowly stretching or focusing on regulating your breathing with slow, even breaths.

Breathing: *It's okay to take a breather!* Focusing on slowing down your breath can decrease autonomic arousal. One way to do this is diaphragmatic breathing. Focus on breathing into your abdomen rather than your chest—your belly will rise while your chest remains still. Pause between each inhale and exhale. Sometimes counting the breaths can be useful to ensure the exhale is as long or longer than the inhale. One way of counting is to inhale for a count of 4, pause for a count of 4, exhale for count of 4, pause for count of 4. Repeat.

Humor: *It's okay to laugh!* Humor is an incredible coping skill. Having a laugh with coworkers, watching funny movies, singing and dancing, and finding comical content online can all serve as breaks and lighten the heaviness of the work.

Accept help: *It's okay to ask for and allow help outside of work, too!* Brainstorm a list of tasks your support network can help with and feel comfortable replying to their offers. People want to help! You have a unique skill set that many others do not and it is being used to care for those most in need. People want to feel useful – let them pick up groceries for you, drop off a gift certificate to your family, or provide distractions in the form of puzzles and games for your family (ensuring proper distancing and precautions).

Strategies to Cope with COVID-19 related mood symptoms

When having catastrophic thoughts:

- Ask yourself, "what is the probability of what I am worrying about to occur?"
- Ask yourself, "How could I cope with the most realistic outcome?"
- When having scary thoughts, refocus onto what is important to you. Center yourself on what you are grateful for and appreciative of in the present moment.

When Feeling anxious, down, or panicked:

- You have control over what you do next including reading a book, taking a walk, calling a loved one, listening to music, etc.
- Belly Breathing: Take a slow deep breath into your nose for a count of 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, and slowly exhale through your mouth for 4 seconds. Watching your belly rise with the breath in and fall with the breath out. Try counting your breaths at same time!
- Try a Meditation app including Headspace, Insight Timer, Calm, and Buddhify
- Engage in physical activity including a walk outside, exercise video, dancing to music
- Reach out to a loved one via phone (audio or FaceTime)

Daily Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors:

- 1) Keep regular sleep/wake cycle (e.g getting up at same time and going to bed at same time; 7-9 hours per night)
- 2) Eating nutritious foods (fruits, vegetables, plant-based protein, fish, etc.) every 4-5 hours
- 3) Mindfulness meditation (using an app or YouTube video)
- 4) Social support (calling or FaceTiming friends and loved ones)
- 5) Self hygiene (e.g. shower, brushing teeth, getting dressed, etc.)

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