

Healthcare Workers and Mental Health

During the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers have been on the frontlines, sacrificing their energy and safety, to help those affected by the virus. Although healthcare workers are trained in disaster response, the toll on mental health is significant. We live in a community known for its world class healthcare systems, so it's very likely we know someone that is a healthcare worker. For this reason, it's important to discuss ways for our community to take care of our healthcare providers.

Sources and signs of stress:

In a recent study with groups of physicians, nurses, advanced practice clinicians, residents, and fellows held during the first week of the COVID-19, pandemic researchers explored three key concerns: what healthcare professionals were most concerned about, what messaging and behaviors they needed from their leaders, and what other tangible sources of support they believed would be most helpful to them. Researchers found that there were eight consistent sources of anxiety:

- access to appropriate personal protective equipment
- being exposed to COVID-19 at work and taking the infection home to their family
- not having immediate access to testing if they develop COVID-19 symptoms and concomitant fear of propagating infection at work
- uncertainty that their organization will support/take care of their personal and family needs if they develop infection
- access to childcare during increased work hours and school closures
- support for other personal and family needs as work hours and demands increase (food, hydration, lodging, transportation)
- being able to provide competent medical care if deployed to a new area (e.g., non-ICU nurses having to function as ICU nurses)
- lack of access to up-to-date information and communication

Managing Stress:

In addition to current training and education, healthcare leaders should provide resources and supportive care to staff. Because healthcare workers generally prioritize the needs of others over their own, leadership should encourage a proper self-care strategy to help battle against stigma, fear of being removed from their duties during a crisis, and equip workers to recognize their own needs.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has provided a list of self-care behaviors for healthcare workers within their organization:

- self-monitoring and pacing
- regular check-ins with colleagues, family, and friends
- working in partnerships or in teams

- brief relaxation/stress management breaks
- regular peer consultation and supervision
- time-outs for basic bodily care and refreshment
- regularly seeking out accurate information and mentoring to assist in making decisions
- keeping anxieties conscribed to actual threats
- doing their best to maintain helpful self-talk and avoid overgeneralizing fears
- focusing their efforts on what is within their power
- acceptance of situations they cannot change
- fostering a spirit of fortitude, patience, tolerance, and hope

At the same time, they should avoid:

- working too long by themselves without checking in with colleagues
- working "round the clock" with few breaks
- feeling that they are not doing enough
- excessive intake of sweets and caffeine
- engaging in self-talk and attitudinal obstacles to self-care, such as:
 - "It would be selfish to take time to rest."
 - "Others are working around the clock, so should I."
 - "The needs of survivors are more important than the needs of helpers."
 - "I can contribute the most by working all the time."
 - "Only I can do. . ."

Visit the [National Center for PTSD](#) for more information and find tools to combat stress.

Hotlines:

Help is available for those in crisis. For more information, contact these hotlines or resources.

- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Disaster Distress Hotline:** 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.
 - People with deafness or hearing loss can use their preferred relay service to call 1-800-985-5990.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255 or [chat online](#) with staff.
- **The Crisis Center of Johnson County:** 1-319-351-0140 or 1-855-325-4296.
- **Iowa Crisis Chat:** Visit this [website](#) for 24 hour confidential online chat with highly trained volunteers and staff.