



Self-Care and Support for Healthcare Workers and their Managers in Dealing with COVID-19 in Low Resource Settings

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Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to both physical and mental health and presents a particular risk to healthcare workers. All health services need to ensure the wellbeing of health and care staff if they are to protect the public as a whole. This applies equally to health services in low and middle income countries where there may be a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to limited resources for infection prevention and control and a shortage of trained staff. Recent evidence from China shows that healthcare workers are under pressure in the current pandemic and feel vulnerable to infection themselves (1). They must understand that the need to manage their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing during this time is just as important as managing physical health. Managers and team leaders are facing similar stresses to their staff and may experience additional pressure relating to the responsibilities of their role.

Key Guidance and other resources:

- 1. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak.**
https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-03/IASC%20Interim%20Briefing%20Note%20on%20COVID-19%20Outbreak%20Readiness%20and%20Response%20Operations%20-%20MHPSS_0.pdf
- 2. World Health Organisation: MHPSS considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak**
<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/mental-health-and-psychosocial-considerations-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>
- 3. Guidelines for Sustaining the Wellbeing of Healthcare Personnel During COVID- 19 Outbreak.**
https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_Well_Being_Healthcare_Personnel_during.pdf.pdf
- 4. Guidelines for Government or Health Agency Response to COVID-19**
https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Mental_Health_Behavioral_Guidelines_Response_to_Coronavirus_Outbreaks.pdf.pdf
- 5. Psychological First Aid.**
https://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/
- 6. WHO Mental Health Humanitarian Intervention Guide.**
https://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/mhGAP_intervention_guide/en/

The COVID- 19 situation will not go away overnight and health services should focus on keeping staff working for as long as needed, not just for a short-term crisis. The following recommendations address the priority actions most relevant for low resource settings and health services in development. The key messages applicable to these settings are drawn from current guidance in respect of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) from the World Health Organisation, other authorities and a systematic review of the relevant scientific evidence (2).

KEY MESSAGES for Health Care Workers

1. Self- Care -

a. Look after your own basic needs first

- If you don't care for yourself first, you won't be able to care for patients. Be sure to eat, drink and sleep regularly. If you go without food and fluids you will be more at risk of illness.

b. Take Breaks

- Give yourself a break from caring for patients. Allow yourself an activity that helps you relax or you like doing – take a walk, listen to music, talk to a friend. Don't feel guilty! Everybody needs to take a break in order to give the best care to patients.

c. Get Help.

- If you are too sad or too stressed, can't sleep or have disturbing thoughts or memories you need to tell your supervisor or talk to a colleague. Avoid unhelpful use of Tobacco, Alcohol or Drugs - these will worsen your mental and physical health.

2. Stay Connected -

a. Talk with Colleagues.

- Tell your fellow workers how you are and ask them how they are doing – give and take support from each other. Infectious disease outbreaks can isolate people and can cause fear and anxiety – don't let it! Saying how you feel and listening to your colleagues will help.

b. Contact your Loved Ones.

- Talk to family, if possible to let them know how you are. Professionals need family too! Your loved ones are the reason you get up in the morning so talking and sharing, if only for a short time, even by phone will help you and them.
- Avoid isolation - contact other people and tell them how you are feeling.

3. Communicate -

a. Give Feedback

- Give positive feedback to your fellow workers as well as pointing out any mistakes. Be positive! Being a professional means we figure out how to solve problems and we are good at it.

b. Get Good Information

- Use reliable sources of information and meetings about what's happening. The news and social media don't always have the best information!

c. Be Proud of your service or hospital and fellow workers.

- Remember, you chose to serve others; you and your colleagues are caring for people most in need.
- Don't be stigmatised - Even if others are avoiding you out of fear or stigma you can still stay connected with the people who care for you.

KEY MESSAGES for Supervisors and Managers

1. Support Your Staff -

Care for Yourself and Your Staff

- Apply the 'KEY MESSAGES for Health Care Workers to yourself.
- Be available for your staff, support them and encourage supportive relationships among your staff.
- Encourage work breaks and try to build in time for colleagues to provide social support to each other.
- Rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions. Partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues.

2. Communicate -

Share Information

- Give regular updates on the facts about the COVID-19 epidemic and how best to protect your staff.
- Prepare employees for the potential impact of negative experiences such as bereavement, isolation and discrimination and give support to those who face these experiences.
- Inform all responders, including nurses, ambulance drivers, volunteers, case identifiers, teachers and community leaders and workers in quarantine sites, on how to provide basic emotional and practical support to affected people using [Psychological First Aid](#).

3. Continuity -

Don't forget the Basics

- Provide appropriate training to healthcare workers to give them the skills, knowledge and confidence to operate under challenging conditions – for example, infection control training.
- Manage urgent mental health and neurological complaints (e.g. delirium, psychosis, severe anxiety or depression) within emergency or general healthcare facilities. Appropriate trained and qualified staff may need to be deployed to these locations when time permits, and the capacity of general healthcare staff capacity to provide mental health and psychosocial support should be increased (see the [mhGAP Humanitarian Intervention Guide](#)).
- Ensure availability of essential, generic psychotropic medications at all levels of health care. People living with long-term mental health conditions or epileptic seizures will need uninterrupted access to their medication, and sudden discontinuation should be avoided.

References:

- (1) Zhang, Chenxi et al. (2020). Survey of Insomnia and Related Social Psychological Factors Among Medical Staffs Involved with the 2019 Novel Coronavirus Disease Outbreak. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3542175> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3542175>
- (2) Brooks, S. K., Dunn, R., Amlot, R., Rubin, G. J., & Greenberg, N. (2018). A systematic, thematic review of social and occupational factors associated with psychological outcomes in healthcare employees during an infectious disease outbreak. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 60(3), 248-257. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000001235>