

Taking Care of Your Emotional Well-Being: Tips for Health Care Workers During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on everyday life. New Yorkers are trying to keep themselves and their loved ones safe, while coping with the loss of community members and continuing to practice physical distancing. Additionally, recent incidents of economic strain, police brutality and increased awareness of racial inequities only add to this extremely challenging time. Health care workers, including clinical providers, administrators and maintenance staff, face unique stressors and challenges. Supporting the physical and mental well-being of health care workers is critical to slowing the spread of the virus and protecting our communities. Knowing how stress uniquely impacts health care workers can help them cope during these difficult times.

COVID-19-Related Stress in Health Care Settings

- **Evolving information:** This is a new virus that had not been previously found in humans. Health care workers must adapt to rapidly changing updates to clinical guidance.
- **Staff shortages:** As health care workers get sick or take time off to care for children or sick family members, staffing is further strained.

COVID-19-Related Stress in Health Care Workers

- **Risk of infection:** All health care workers, including home care workers and those in community-based settings are at increased risk for infection. Workers may have to weigh health risks, including keeping their families safe, with potential loss of income.
- **Workload:** Many health care workers are working extra or longer shifts, performing duties outside of their usual role and experiencing heavier workloads. Health care workers also have other responsibilities outside of the workplace that may have increased during the pandemic.
- **Patient volume:** Stress related to potentially having to make difficult decisions regarding time and resources can feel overwhelming.
- **Physical stress:** Health care workers may be experiencing physical pain associated with longer shifts, wearing protective gear and changing routines and protocols.
- **Death toll:** Caring for critically ill patients and witnessing deaths is difficult. Health care workers may express feelings of anger, helplessness or a loss of control.
- **New surroundings:** Health care providers may be working in new environments and commuting along new routes or with different transit methods; some have volunteered to work in new settings or returned from retirement. For many, the new environment alone may add an element of stress.
- **Financial stress:** Loss of income by one or more members of the household may make it difficult for health care workers to take sick leave themselves, so they are able to provide for their household.

Ways to Manage Stress

Emotional reactions to stressful situations, such as this emerging health crisis, are expected. It is important to remember to take care of yourself so you can continue to care of others. While there are many things outside of your control, focus on the things that are within your control to help manage stress and anxiety and promote resilience.

- **Feel your feelings.** Acknowledge when you feel sad, angry, frustrated and exhausted. It is natural for those feelings to be overwhelming at times. Recognize what you are feeling in the moment and know that it is OK.
- **Self-monitor physical and mental health.** Notice changes that might indicate physical illness or increased anxiety or depression. Free services are being offered online or via applications (apps) that help with mindfulness and mental health support. NYC Well offers a number of well-being and emotional support apps that can help you cope. Visit the “App Library” at nyc.gov/nycwell for online tools to help you manage your health and emotional well-being. Check with your employer for support services that may be available to staff.
- **Take breaks as you are able.** Even if for just a minute or two, allow yourself to stop and re-focus on where you are, how you are feeling and what you must do next. Breathing and other mindfulness exercises can help calm anxiety and re-establish focus when feeling overwhelmed.¹
- **Take a break from the news.** Set aside time for activities that are fun and relaxing outside of work and COVID-19-related news.
- **Be sure to eat and sleep regularly.** In stressful situations, we often forget our most basic needs. Make time for adequate rest, healthy eating and physical activity.

Stay Connected

It is important to stay connected to loved ones and our support networks.

- **Check in with family, friends and loved ones.** Use email, text, video chat, phone or social media. A quick hello can remind you that people are grateful for your hard work and commitment.
- **Check in with colleagues while working.** Speak with supervisors and coworkers, acknowledge the stress everyone shares, and support each other.
- **Identify and use your support network.** Know whom to reach out to when you feel sad or angry or need a break. Identify activities that help you cope with specific feelings and share these with those you feel comfortable reaching out to so your support network is ready to respond when needed.

¹**Breathing:** Take slow, deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Notice your stomach expand as you breathe in, and feel it contract as you breathe out. Repeat.

Mindfulness: The practice of being aware and present. Ground yourself in the present by bringing your attention to your current surroundings. For example, take the time to notice five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell and one thing you taste.

Create a Supportive Work Environment

Many standard policies and procedures are evolving to meet the needs of the COVID-19 response. This can lead to confusion and increased stress. Leadership should provide additional support to help reduce these feelings.

- **Communicate clearly and often with staff.** Acknowledge that things are constantly changing but provide consistent and clear messaging as situations evolve. Promote a sense of calm and safety while acknowledging difficult circumstances.
- **Acknowledge concerns of staff.** Make sure staff feel heard, and address their concerns. Be clear about the status of protective measures, including PPE, patient protocols and resource allocation. There might not be an answer for everything, but questions should still be heard.
- **Acknowledge and respond to health disparities among Black and Latino/a New Yorkers:** Acknowledge that rates of COVID-19 infections and related deaths have been higher among Black and Latino/a New Yorkers to your staff. Respond to these inequities by making sure concerns of Black and Latino/a staff are heard and addressed.
- **Acknowledge and respond to traumatizing incidents of police violence and protests demanding justice:** It is important to acknowledge particularly traumatizing incidents of police brutality and protests confronting historical and current traumas experienced by Black, Indigenous and other people of color. It is also important to acknowledge emotional concerns staff have regarding protests against incidents of police brutality, racial injustice and inequity in addition to fear for their own and loved ones' safety. Allow time off for staff to grieve and engage in self-care.
- **Provide training and stress management opportunities.** Incorporate stress management tools into standard protocols. Provide outlets and resources for staff to receive mental health support, including opportunities to engage anonymously. Encourage staff to access resources as a regular self-care practice.

Additional Support and Information

- For additional information on stress and anxiety, including tips for coping and staying connected and information on grief and loss, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.
- NYC Department of Youth and Community Development offers resources for all ages on how to talk about racism. Visit nyc.gov and search for [talking about racism](#).
- Visit RaceForward.org and read their [call to action](#) for race equitable emergency planning to address impact on people and communities of color.
- NYC Well offers well-being and emotional support applications ([apps](#)) that can help you cope. Many of these resources are offering free, premium services for health care workers. If your symptoms of stress become overwhelming, contact NYC Well to speak with a trained counselor, 24 hours a day and seven days a week (24/7), in over 200 languages. Call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text "WELL" to 65173 or chat at nyc.gov/nycwell.
- New York State's COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline is staffed with specially trained volunteer professionals. They will be there to listen, support and offer referrals 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week at 844-863-9314.

- Worker Protection Hotline is available for questions about reopening, health and safety guidelines for the workplace, or to report an employer that is not following reopening requirements. Call **311** or 212-436-0381.
- For those living outside NYC, the national Disaster Distress Helpline is available 24/7 with emotional support and crisis counseling for anyone experiencing distress or other mental health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Calls (800-985-5990) and texts (text “TalkWithUs” to 66746) are answered by trained counselors who will listen to the caller’s concerns, explore coping and other available supports, and offer referrals to community resources for follow-up care and support.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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