

Healthcare workers: You have the power to manage stress

The anxiety and fear resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic can be profound, and nowhere is that more evident than with frontline healthcare workers. Working long hours in substandard conditions with patients who are often very ill and highly contagious, they fear for their personal health and that of their families. Many feel let down by the system at-large due to a lack of pandemic preparation, including a proper supply of the most elemental line of defense – personal protective equipment.

The documented concerns of healthcare workers is real. Stress is a physiological reaction. Neurochemical hormones flood the brain and body to prepare us for fight or flight during times of stress, explains psychologist Susan J. Mecca, PhD, and author of [“The Gift of Crisis: Finding Your Best Self in the Worst of Times”](#). Further, these chemicals’ impact doesn’t immediately dissipate; their effects can last for days or weeks. Short-term effects can include changes in eating habits, sleep difficulties, or irritability. Long-term effects can include emotional over-reactivity, depression, anxiety, poor concentration and more, according to Dr. Mecca.

Data bear out the reality of stress among healthcare workers. In [one study](#) during an acute outbreak of SARS, 89 percent of healthcare workers in stressful situations reported having psychological problems.

Practical steps to getting through it

In addition to good health and hygiene habits, below are steps Dr. Mecca suggests that healthcare workers take to help them navigate this extraordinarily stressful time.

1. *Create rituals to strengthen the boundaries between work and home.* Dr. Mecca says that it’s important for people to find a way to let the workday go once they leave. Real-life examples include getting out of hospital scrubs and taking a shower. Some people will stop at a park near their house, to decompress and unwind, as part of letting go of a difficult day. Meditating or praying, especially at night or other specified times, can help people let the day go. Another tactic is to create a time when you let yourself think about your patients when not at work, but set limits so that you can have some ‘down time.’ For example, you might let yourself think about work during your commute home but then shift your attention when your commute ends.
2. *Engage in positive self-talk, gratitude and self-compassion.* Remember your natural skills for caregiving and that you know who to contact when you need help with a particular problem. Also, actively focus on things for which you are grateful. Gratitude helps people focus on the positive aspects of their lives rather than on the difficult ones, which as Dr. Mecca explains, “just want to stick in your brain”. Have compassion for

yourself when you feel you haven't performed at your best. Too much self-judgment can fuel negative thinking.

3. *Tap into a community of support and create "quality" time.* This is no time to be alone. Think about what you need from people to help you through these tough times. Then recruit, shape and maintain a support community that includes colleagues, friends and family. In these times of social distancing, that can mean virtual coffee breaks and other virtual social gatherings, or FaceTime phone calls and Zoom meetings. It can be playing online games, such as an ongoing Scrabble game. Here "quality" means time that is planned with family and friends when you don't discuss the pandemic. It's another way of setting boundaries.
4. *Set priorities.* Let go of or outsource the tasks that aren't critical. Focus only on what is absolutely necessary and use any other available time for self-care.
5. *Get intentional when dealing with the unknown.* It's important to recognize what you can and cannot control. Ultimately, you control you. "You can decide who you're going to be in this time of crisis," says Dr. Mecca. "Once you have that, you have a flight path." Also, write down a list of the challenges you're facing and circle the things you can control. Figure out the steps you can take to make that control happen. Let go of the ones you can't personally impact.

During this pandemic, we support our healthcare workers to be the best they can be by urging them to take care of themselves – physically, psychologically and emotionally. Beacon Health Options is #CaringthroughCovid.