

Frontline workers and COVID-19: coping with stress



Going to work during this COVID-19 pandemic has placed frontline workers under immense and unprecedented pressure, putting their physical, mental and social well-being at risk. Exposure to excessive stress, for prolonged periods can have many harmful consequences on the emotional and mental well-being of frontline workers. It can:

- lead to burnout.
- trigger the onset of common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- result in unhealthy behaviours like using tobacco, alcohol or other substances, which may lead to substance use disorders.
- result in frequent absence from work or reduced productivity while at work.
- increase the risk of suicide among frontline workers, particularly health care workers.

In the context of COVID-19, this may mean compromised quality and safety of care, breach of protocols and guidelines, increased risk of infections, and compromised capacity of the health system and emergency response teams. While many of the efforts to reduce stress and care for frontline workers must be made by organizations, managers and health administrators, frontline workers can also take actions to cope with stress.

Actions frontline workers can take to cope with stress during COVID-19

Put things in perspective

- Take stock of which things are within your control, and which challenges you have no control over.
- Spend some time each day recounting a few of the things you have accomplished.

Stay informed

- Seek information from reliable sources such as WHO and your local health authority on topics such as case identification, infection prevention and control (IPC) or any topic relevant to your role in the response.
- Consider taking an online course from a trusted provider, and keep these tools accessible in the field.

Avoid information overload

- Try to limit your exposure to media coverage as much as possible, including through social media.
- Avoid sources of unverified medical information and try to avoid the spread of myths and rumours.



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Stay connected

- Reach out to friends and family members via text or video chat, and join meals or social activities virtually.
- Exchange support with trusted colleagues at work, as many may be having similar experiences.
- Consider creating a formal or informal platform where you and your colleagues can share knowledge and discuss some ethical dilemmas you are facing.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

- Maintain a healthy diet, stay well-hydrated, and try to get at least a few minutes of exercise a day.
- Rest during any downtime at work and get enough sleep between shifts.
- Avoid unhealthy coping behaviours such as using tobacco, alcohol or other substances.

Take better care of yourself

- Make time to do simple actions that bring joy, comfort and boost self-esteem on a regular basis.
- Practice techniques like breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, grounding and mindfulness.

Advocate for yourself

- Familiarise yourself with your rights to advocate for yourself. For example, clarify your rights for compensation and treatment in case of infection or legal protection from harassment and violence.
- Communicate openly with your supervisor and ask for the support you need, such as work adjustments (e.g. flexible schedule, rotation to less stressful tasks), more protective equipment or further training.
- Consider appointing an advocate like a trusted senior colleague instead of raising concerns individually.

Adhere to your treatment

- If you are receiving treatment for a mental health condition, stick to your medications, and communicate with your mental health care provider about making adjustments to your regimen if needed.
- Where face-to-face psychological support is difficult, search for virtual alternatives.

Know your limits

- If you feel too overwhelmed and unable to cope, consider what actions you can take to relieve some of your burdens at work or at home and discuss these with your supervisor or family members.
- It is also essential to monitor yourself for symptoms and immediately report exposure incidents or if you suspect that you may be infected.

Seek professional help

- Seek help from a health professional if your feelings of distress persist and it becomes difficult to cope with your daily activities at work or at home. This could be your doctor or a psychiatrist or therapist.
- Consider utilising some local resources that have been developed for the COVID-19 response such as psychological support hotlines and remote counselling services.