

# COVID-19 Employee Emotional Support Guidelines

March 2020



# 7 steps for healthcare workers: Coping with COVID-19 related anxiety or distress

## 1. Acknowledge your feelings and accept others may react differently to the same situation

- Feeling distressed is an experience that many healthcare workers are likely to experience. It is quite common to be feeling this way during a crisis
- It is very helpful to know your personal signs of distress so you know when to respond.

## 2. Take care of your basic needs *first!*

- Maintain your day-to-day normal activities and routine wherever and whenever possible
- Ensure sleep, rest and respite, eat sufficient and healthy food
- Make time to unwind. Take time for yourself
- Try to do physical activities you enjoy
- Don't use smoking, alcohol, caffeine or drugs to deal with your emotions.

## 3. Stay connected, especially with your loved ones

- Some health workers may experience avoidance or anger from their family or community due to fear. This can make an already challenging situation far more difficult.
- If possible, stay closely and consistently connected with your loved ones, including through digital methods.

## 4. Draw on the skills you have used in the past when you've managed previous life challenges.



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## 5. Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted people for support.

- Consider implementing a local buddy system.

## 6. Seek accurate information/facts

- Stay up to date with Monash Health's advice and support
- Follow protection and prevention recommendations provided.

## 7. Limit the time you spend watching or listening to media (including social media) coverage that you know is inaccurate and/or perceive as upsetting

- Don't engage in spreading rumours, conjecture and 'gallows humour'.



# Signs of burnout and secondary traumatic stress

- **Burnout** – feelings of *extreme* exhaustion and being *completely* overwhelmed.
- **Signs of burnout:**
  - Ongoing sadness, depression, or apathy
  - Easily frustrated
  - Blaming of others, irritability, anger
  - Lacking feelings, indifferent, ambivalent
  - Isolation or disconnection from others
  - Poor self-care (e.g. hygiene)
  - Consistently and constantly tired, exhausted or overwhelmed
  - Feeling like:
    - a failure
    - nothing you can do will help
    - you are not doing your job well
    - you need alcohol/other drugs to cope
- **Secondary traumatic stress** – distressed reaction resulting from exposure to another individual's traumatic experiences, rather than from direct exposure to a traumatic event.
- **Signs of secondary traumatic stress:**
  - *Excessive* worry or fear about something bad happening
  - *Easily* startled or 'on guard' all the time
  - Physical signs of stress (e.g. racing heart)
  - Nightmares or recurrent thoughts about the traumatic situation
  - The feeling that others' trauma is yours



# Look after each other in your work team

People who work together should look out for others in their team. Partner to support each other, and monitor each other's stress, workload, and safety.

- Get to know each other: talk about background, interests, hobbies, and family. Identify each other's strengths and weaknesses in responding to a crisis.
- Keep an eye on each other. Try to work in the same location if/when you can.
- Set up formal times to check-in with each other. Listen carefully and share experiences and feelings. Acknowledge tough situations and recognise accomplishments, even small ones.
- Offer to help with basic needs such as sharing supplies and transportation.
- Monitor each other's workloads. Encourage each other to take breaks. Share opportunities for stress relief (e.g. rest, routine sleep, exercise, and deep breathing/mindfulness).
- If your team mate is feeling overwhelmed, make sure they feel safe to speak up.



# Prepare and plan with your loved ones

- Reduce your concerns by preparing for and protecting your loved ones during the crisis.
- Create a communication plan that allows you to stay closely and consistently connected to your loved ones throughout.
- Develop a plan which involves all members of the household.
- Keep discussing the crisis calmly and factually with your loved ones to help them remain connected to what is going on for you.

Sources: World Health Organisation (2020); Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2020); British Medical Association (2020); Royal College of General Practitioners (2020); University of Melbourne (2020)

