

## **Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations: Supporting People Working in the COVID-19 Response**

We are currently living in an unprecedented and uncertain time and many front-line workers such as carers, emergency response workers, medical and allied health professionals, are likely to feel stressed and under enormous pressure during the COVID-19 outbreak.

This guidance has been developed with the view to address mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 for staff and volunteers working on the front-line. It also provides information on how workers may expect to feel in the days and months ahead.

### **Common Psychological and Physical Reactions:**

In any pandemic, it is common for individuals to feel stressed and worried. Some of the specific challenges front-line workers may face include:

- Separation from loved ones
- Strict procedures to follow preventing spontaneity and autonomy
- Physical restrictions of not being able to touch other people both at home and in the work -place due to risk of transmission
- Surge in demand in work settings
- Stigma from others towards those working directly with COVID-19 patients
- Not being able to work during isolation if unwell themselves and concerned around the impact this has on staffing levels
- Insufficient personal and energy levels to fulfil basic selfcare needs
- Challenges in mediating the tensions between public health priorities and the wishes of beneficiaries and their families

### **Some of the common psychological reactions workers may experience as a result of this include:**

- Fear of falling ill and dying, as well as the subsequent implications for self, patients, beneficiaries and family
- Common flu and cold symptoms being mistaken for COVID-19
- Anticipatory anxiety about what's on the way
- Inner conflict about competing needs and demands
- Fear of stigma when out in public

- Moral Injury: the mental, emotional, and spiritual distress people feel after perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations
- Sadness: feelings of distress, injustice, helplessness and tearfulness linked to personal experiences, concerns over loved ones etc
- A lack of feeling accomplished or feeling ineffective
- Sleep disturbance: difficulty in getting off to sleep, restless sleep, vivid dreams, night-sweats or nightmares
- Feeling numb or detached from others or being unable to experience emotions such as happiness
- Feelings of frustration and boredom from repetitive nature of work

**Some of the common physical reactions workers may experience include:**

- Physical strain of protective equipment
- Tension, muscular aches and pain (especially in the head, neck and back)
- Exhaustion, tiredness and insomnia, memory loss, changes in appetite
- Dizziness, Shakiness and trembling
- Abdominal pain/tummy aches/nausea/vomiting and diarrhoea/menstrual changes
- Reduced libido or change in sexual interest
- Palpitations, breathing difficulties

**Some of the common behaviours workers may experience include:**

- Tension in working relationships
- Communication errors
- Full sprint and automatic pilot mode
- Withdrawal: avoiding social and family contact
- Irritability and anger: this can often be directed at loved ones, close family friends or colleagues

This is an unprecedented time and it is natural to have any or all these feelings and indeed is a normal reaction to a very abnormal set of circumstances. It is okay not to be okay and it is by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak. Alternatively, some people may have some positive experiences, such as taking pride in the work they are doing and gaining satisfaction in helping others. Furthermore, the feeling of stress may be keeping you going and provide you with a sense of purpose.

### Helpful Strategies:

Managing your stress and psychosocial wellbeing during this time is as important as managing your physical health. Remember this is a marathon not a sprint, so pace yourself and make time for strategies which you find helpful. Some examples of helpful strategies include:

- Ensuring opportunities for rest and respite during work or between shifts
- Consider your psychological energy levels – you will need to replenish after a difficult or long shift. Take time out to meet basic needs including refreshments such as healthy food and good quality sleep.
- Where possible, stay connected with your loved ones; digital methods are one way to maintain contact
- Brief relaxation and stress management breaks can help. It may take longer to think things through, make sense of things or recall information when overwhelmed – be kind to yourself and be mindful of this. Stop, take a back step and breath, then think. This can help regulate your breathing, slow the stress cycle and re-engage your frontal lobes which will help you feel more in control.
- Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted persons for social support- your colleagues may be having similar experiences to you. In addition to this, seek out accurate information and mentoring to assist in making decisions. Furthermore, peer consultation and supervision can be helpful.
- Engage in physical activity
- Maintain focus on what is within your power and accept of situations which you cannot change, however acknowledge this can be difficult at times.
- A near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel anxious or distressed; Limit your exposure to the news to certain times of the day and get the facts: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) and <https://www.whatsapp.com/coronavirus/who>
- Check in and monitor yourself over time for any signs of burnout, prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping or a sense of being completely overwhelmed. If this becomes unmanageable do not be afraid to seek support for yourself e.g. management, occupational health, mental health teams, GP etc.

### Avoid:

- Avoid working too long in isolation without checking in with colleagues
- Avoid engaging in self-talk and attitudinal obstacles to self-care, such as: “I am not doing enough”, “It would be selfish to take time to rest.”; “Others are working around the clock, so should I.”; “The needs of patients/beneficiaries are more important than the needs of helpers.”
- Avoid using unhelpful coping strategies such as tobacco, alcohol or illicit substances, as well as excessive intake of sweets and caffeine. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical wellbeing.
- Avoid inflammatory language or fuelling rumours which can panic colleagues

### Advice for Team Leaders or Managers:

If you are a team leader or manager, keeping all staff protected from chronic stress and poor mental health during this outbreak means that they will have a better capacity to fulfil their roles as front-line workers. Keep in mind that the current situation will not go away overnight and you should focus on longer term occupational capacity rather than repeated short-term crisis responses. Some strategies which can enable this include:

- Regularly and supportively monitor your staff and volunteers for their wellbeing and foster an environment which promotes psychological safety which enables colleagues to speak with you if their mental wellbeing worsens.
- Ensure good quality communication and accurate information updates are provided to all staff and volunteers; and use understandable ways to share messages with people with intellectual, cognitive and psychosocial disabilities. This can help to mitigate any worry about uncertainty that workers have and helps colleagues to feel a sense of control.
- Rest is important for physical and mental wellbeing and this time will allow workers to implement their necessary self-care activities; consider if there is any capacity to ensure your staff and volunteers get the rest and recuperation they need.
- Provide a brief and regular forum to allow staff and volunteers to express their concerns, ask questions and encourage peer-support amongst colleagues.
- Without breaking confidentiality, pay careful attention to any staff or volunteers who you may be aware are experiencing difficulties in their personal life, previously experiencing poor mental health or who are lacking in social support.
- Facilitate access to, and ensure staff are aware of where they can access mental health and psychosocial support services if required. Additionally, staff drop-in sessions with employee wellbeing teams where possible, can be helpful.
- Ensure management are visible and available
- Where possible, rotate workers from high stress to low stress roles
- Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member impacted by a stressful event
- Partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues
- Develop individual and team attitude towards common task sharing. For example, a buddy system helps to provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety procedures.
- Know how to provide support to people who are affected with COVID-19 and establish clear escalation pathways to link them with available and appropriate resources.
- Ensure staff and volunteers have appropriate equipment and aware of measures and escalation procedures in line with organisational, government, public health and world health guidelines.

- Orientate staff and volunteers on how to provide basic emotional and practical support to the people they support, using psychological first aid.
- It is important to note, managers and team leaders will face similar stressors as their colleagues, plus the additional pressure due to the level of responsibility of their role. It is important that the above provisions and strategies are in place for both workers and managers, and that managers can role-model self-care strategies to mitigate stress.

### **Longer Term:**

After a period of caring for beneficiaries---especially providing support for patients with COVID-19---a readjustment period is to be expected. This may include:

- Seeking out and sharing social support, which may need to occur virtually
- Checking in with other colleagues to discuss work experiences. As a team you may want to arrange a formal debriefing, reflective group and/or opportunities for individual sessions, which will allow an opportunity for learning, defusing and preparation for the future.
- Watch out for signs of traumatic responses amongst colleagues including flashbacks or intrusive thought/images, avoidance of reminders of the work or hypervigilance. If these continue for longer than 4 – 6 weeks and interferes with daily functioning, signposting to further mental health support may need to be considered.
- Organise thank you and rewards in recognition of the work staff and volunteers have undertaken.
- Schedule time off work for relaxation and gradual reintegration into personal life
- Prepare for worldview changes that may not be mirrored by others in one's life; you may find your value system and perceptions have shifted and you don't want to talk about work experiences with others.

**References:**

- <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/briefing-note-about>
- <https://www.ics.ac.uk/ICS/Education/Wellbeing/ICS/Wellbeing.aspx?hkey=92348f51-a875-4d87-8ae4-245707878a5c>
- <https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/28063/coronavirus-covid-19/psychosocial-support-and-wellbeing>
- <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>
- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>
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- <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>

**British Red Cross Staff and Volunteers should also see the guidance on Supporting Service Users in Self-Isolation as well as other guidance on RedRoom under the Psychosocial and Mental Health Team.**

**See also our resources in our 'Mental Health in Emergencies' playlist on YouTube:**

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZqB1U2YzcaaPqboZZsnluympro9xzUa>

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**Disclaimer**

This information reflects the best available evidence at the time of writing. The Psychosocial and Mental Health team will review our psychosocial information on a regular basis.

