



WELL BEING MATTERS

THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL

Managing occupational stress during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone's stress level has increased dramatically. However, for healthcare professionals and essential employees working on the front lines, this stress level can be increased.

Stress is defined by the National Institute of Mental Health as "the brain's response to any demand". Put simply, stress is the way we feel, think, and react when we are—or perceive that we are—under pressure. Therefore, stress can either drive us to act, or it can slow us down from functioning normally.

In this article we discuss stress, what it may look like, burnout, and tips for dealing with stress during these unprecedented times.



Wellbeing Matters

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The stress Effect

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What stress might look like for you

Burnout

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Tips for coping with stress

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DO YOU KNOW WHAT STRESS LOOKS LIKE?



Work related stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope (WHO 2020)

Working as a healthcare professional can be challenging during these unprecedented times. Stress can affect how you feel emotionally, mentally and physically. Stress can also affect how you behave. Our response to stress is unique and can vary between individuals. You can feel emotionally overwhelmed, agitated or easily wound up. You can also feel irritable or anxious and lacking in self-esteem. Our roles may change within our environments and tasks which you were once confident and comfortable completing may become much more challenging.

It's not always easy to recognise when stress is the reason you're feeling or acting differently so take a look at the box to the right which may help you recognize the symptoms.

In addition to the regular work stress you experience, many healthcare and essential workers are reporting the following stressors:

Working longer hours

Gowning and de-gowning between patients

Shortage of critical supplies

Experiencing the trauma of seeing very sick patients suffer or lose their life

Fear of contracting the virus

Fear of infecting a loved one

Separation from loved ones

And more

Here are the different ways that stress may present:



Physical Symptoms

- Headaches or dizziness
- Muscle tension or pain
- Stomach problems
- Chest pain or a faster heartbeat
- Sexual problems
- Hair loss
- Sweaty palms

Mental symptoms

- Difficulty concentrating
- Struggling to make decisions
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Constantly worrying
- Being forgetful
- Isolation
- Fatigue

Changes in behaviour

- Being irritable and snappy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Eating too much or too little
- Avoiding certain places or people
- drinking or smoking more

BURNOUT

Working in the healthcare industry can be both gratifying and challenging. Burnout has become a big concern within healthcare. It is a response to prolonged exposure to occupational stressors, and it has serious consequences for healthcare professionals and the organizations in which they work. Burnout is associated with sleep deprivation, medical errors, poor quality of care and low patient satisfaction.



Sleep Deprivation

Medical Errors

Poor Quality of Care

Low patient Satisfaction



Job burnout symptoms? Ask yourself:

- Have you become cynical or critical at work?
- Do you drag yourself to work and have trouble getting started?
- Have you become irritable or impatient with co-workers, customers or clients?
- Do you lack the energy to be consistently productive?
- Do you find it hard to concentrate?
- Do you lack satisfaction from your achievements?
- Do you feel disillusioned about your job?
- Are you using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel?
- Have your sleep habits changed?
- Are you troubled by unexplained headaches, stomach or bowel problems, or other physical complaints?

If you answered yes to any of these questions – you may be experiencing burnout



Possible Causes of burnout

Lack of control. An inability to influence decisions that affect your job — such as your schedule, assignments or workload — could lead to job burnout. So could a lack of the resources you need to do your work.

Unclear job expectations. If you're unclear about the degree of authority you have or what your supervisor or others expect from you, you're not likely to feel comfortable at work



Dysfunctional workplace dynamics. Perhaps at work you feel undermined by colleagues or your boss micromanages your work. This can contribute to job stress.

Extremes of activity. When a job is monotonous or chaotic, you need constant energy to remain focused — which can lead to fatigue and job burnout.



Lack of social support. If you feel isolated at work and in your personal life, you might feel more stressed.

Work-life imbalance. If your work takes up so much of your time and effort that you don't have the energy to spend time with your family and friends, you may burn out quickly.

How to Manage Stress

1. **Meditation:** Meditation is a practice that helps us regain control over our thoughts and mind. This skill can be used anywhere that you feel comfortable and able to engage in practice. The following link is a 15 minute guided meditation which is designed to relieve stress during the Covid 19 pandemic:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WnxvU1_xOI

Body scanning is a form of meditation. Body scan meditation can be particularly useful and effective, allowing us to check in with our bodies which is especially important to do during these challenging times. By mentally scanning yourself from head to toe you are bringing awareness to every single part of your body, noticing any aches, pains, tension, or general discomfort. Staying present with and breathing into these sensations can help bring relief to our minds and bodies. A short three minute guided body scan is available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihwcv_ofuME

2. **Belly Breathing:** Deep breathing exercises can help to relax your body and calm you down. Taking deep breaths can help you to focus on what you are about to do. Belly breathing is easy to do and very relaxing.



Here is a step by step guide to belly breathing:

- Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position.
- Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.
- Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out.
- Feel the hand on your belly go in and use it to push all the air out.
- Do this breathing 3 to 10 times.
- Take your time with each breath.

3. Reframing: During difficult times, it can be hard to maintain a positive outlook. The skill of reframing is a powerful tool that can be used to help look at difficult situations or stress differently. By using reframing, we can train our brain to see the positive outcome of a situation.



Exercise and Stress

Stress is a part of life, particularly now during the current COVID 19 pandemic. Stress as we all know can take a toll on our overall wellbeing – both physically and mentally. We are experiencing an increase level of stress in both the workplace and in our home lives as we live with uncertainty, fear and increased demands on our wellbeing. We cannot control our current circumstances, but we can have some control over how we choose to react to them.



= Health is Wealth

Exercise is a great effective form of relieving stress and the benefits can be felt in minutes. As little as 10-15 mins of aerobic activity has been shown to increase mood.(Cooper, S.L., 2020.) Both a reduction in anxiety and an improved mood have been shown to be immediate post exercise benefits. Reduction in anger, confusion, depression, tension is often reported after a single bout of physical activity (Ensari et al, 2015; Berger and Motl, 2000). Physical activity is key to managing stress and increasing mental wellbeing (Wunsch et al, 2019).

So, when we talk about exercise, we are not necessarily relating to overall fitness levels/muscle size but more in relation to your wellbeing. Exercise/physical activity can have many benefits including:



Sharma et al 2006

Physical Activity can take many forms, such as:

- Walking
- Weight/strength training
- Dancing
- Skipping
- Gardening
- Running
- Cycling
- Yoga/Tai chi – types of mind and body connection exercises
- Pilates
- Golf
- Tennis

It has been stated that for physical activity to impact on our mental well-being it must be x 3 days per week for a duration of 10-15 minutes at a low intensity. While a superior effect will be achieved if we can perform physical activity on 4-5+ days per week for 20+ minutes at a moderate to vigorous intensity. (Copper, S.L. 2020.)

How do we maintain engagement with physical activity?

- Make it fun
- Workout with friends/family
- Chose an activity you enjoy
- Take the opportunity to learn a new activity
- Begin easy and build up slowly

How do we fit exercise into our lives going forward?

- Combine exercise with family time – walk/cycle as a family, play ball games in the garden
- Make it a priority in your daily/weekly life – schedule it into your diary making a commitment to it
- Form a routine that is manageable – pick a place and time that suits your schedule and stick with it
- Convenience – choose a time that fits into your current schedule, try activities that can be done without equipment/memberships/specific facilities making it easier to engage in without the additional conflicts

“To keep our body in good health is a duty... otherwise, we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear” Buddha

Sensory tools to assist with your stress management



Mindful Breathing Meditation

Listen to guided recording

Grounding exercise



Find a quiet place. You can be seated or standing for this exercise, but you must have your feet in contact with the ground. Close your eyes. Visualise yourself as a large, strong, tree; this tree has a deep, root system which is going far down into the earth. Imagine these roots are coming out from your feet and travelling deep into the earth. Breathe down into your feet as you do this. Spend some time on this process of breathing and visualising. This deep root system is anchoring you to the ground and stabilising you.

Feel the power and safety of this visualisation and let it bring your attention down into your feet and ground you to the here and now.



Listen to guided recording. This practice is most effective if completed multiple times daily



Stretch your limbs

Complete 4 gentle stretches of your choice which do not cause you any pain or discomfort; focus on the breath cycle as you gently and slowly complete these mindful stretches

*If you wish you can burn an incense stick or an essential oil you like and use this along with your breathing exercise

*Soothing, gentle music can also be used when completing these exercises.

Get to know yourself:

What are the signs I am feeling stressed?

Engage in self-observation – Recognise what are my triggers?

Identify activities which you find relaxing, engage in at least one of these daily, this can be your relaxation toolbox/kit.

E.g. essential oils, hand cream, meditation app on your smart phone, jar with all your fun activities on small pieces of paper which you can randomly pick from daily as a self-care treat.

Put supports in place to help you in stressful situations, for example:

- Don't skip lunch
- Go outside and get some fresh air
- Take a break
- Engage in supervision
- Use a Journal/diary throughout your day or at the end of day to record your feelings or thoughts
- Write an appreciation column; what worked well for you today
- Identify any needed professional training you need to increase your competence and confidence
- Have fun at work – this can make the environment less emotionally taxing; tell jokes, sing, 'Fat Friday' lunch break with staff
- Celebrate happy occasions

*"the best six doctors anywhere
and no one can deny it,
are sunshine, water, rest, and air, exercise and diet.
These six will gladly you attend,
if only you are willing, your mind they'll ease,
your will they'll mend,
and charge you not a shilling"*