

## SELF CARE GUIDE FOR STAFF LOOKING AFTER PATIENTS WITH CORONAVIRUS

As we are all aware, the new coronavirus – which causes the illness called Covid-19 – is infecting increasing amounts of people in the UK. As we know from recent public statements, this phase will be disruptive to our own lives and the way we provide care. Very understandably, it is likely to be a time of anxiety.

It will also be a time of flexibility. We know that NHS staff will demonstrate an ongoing commitment to our patients and their care. However, research and experience tells us that frontline health care workers are at risk of increased psychological distress due to the demands that these types of events cause.

There are steps that each of us can take – individually, as colleagues and as managers – to support ourselves and each other during this time, and to encourage everyone’s resilience.

### What makes for resilient staff, and what you can do to look after yourself

There are a number of behaviours and traits that promote resilience and allow us to endure stressful situations.

#### Normality

- It’s important to recognise that we are entering a phase where all of us may have to work differently and adopt new behaviours. These new ways of working, and the sense of uncertainty, will become ‘the new normal’ for some time.
- Given the experience of other countries, the period may well be a number of months. Recognising that, and pacing ourselves as much as possible, is really helpful.
- Even if we are doing a task that is familiar, performing it in an unfamiliar environment (e.g. a different ward, or while wearing PPE) means there is the potential for it to take more time, to lead to more distress or to create fatigue. It is important to be patient with ourselves, colleagues, patients and the public as we adapt and learn new ways of delivering and receiving care.

#### Normal feelings

- This is an unusual and stressful situation. Anxiety, stress and worry are normal, understandable and completely reasonable in such circumstances.
- The presence of these feelings does not suggest psychological fragility or mental ill health. Nor does it mean that you are in any way weak, inept or poor at coping. Sometimes these feelings can help us recognise the difficulties of a situation and take meaningful actions to protect ourselves: psychologically, emotionally and physically.

#### Information

- One of the main things we can do to reduce our sense of uncertainty is to stay informed. When we understand what we are facing, and are prepared, then our distress can reduce.
- You can familiarise yourself with the correct advice about Covid-19 in general but also in relation to the area you work in using the following sources:
  - Health Protection Scotland: <https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk>
  - NHS 24: <https://www.nhs24.scot>
  - NHS Inform: <https://www.nhsinform.scot>
  - NHS Lanarkshire: <https://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk>
  - Local management advice re: supporting staff during critical incidents

## Support

- Maintain peer and social support at work. It's important that we check on how each other are, share worries/how we're feeling, talk about successes/positive things, and ensure that as a team we pull together.
- NHS Lanarkshire's Staff Care & Wellbeing helpline is open 24 hours a day **01698 752 000**.
- Spreading the work and ensuring that there is balance between harder and easier tasks is important. Maintain communication among your team – and use humour where appropriate!
- Our own social connections outside of work are also really important. Friends, family, cultural and faith groups all add to our resilience, and the resilience of others. A sense of community connectedness is key during this stressful time. Do what you can to promote that at work and at home.
- Inevitably some of our normal social contacts will be stretched. Shifts, fatigue, our own or others' self-isolation, or broader government policy, may all make contact harder. Therefore thinking about how to maintain these connections is vital, e.g. phone calls, video calls, social media etc.
- While many of us will use social media and the internet for support, there is the potential for rumours and incorrect information to circulate. Go to reputable sources for information, and follow NHSL guidance on what to share.
- We may also become overloaded with distressing news. This can erode our own and our colleagues' ability to cope. It may be helpful to limit how much time we spend on social media or news channels, and perhaps only to check at set times during the day.

## Self-care

Much of this will be self-evident and familiar as it is what we recommend to our patients. However, in the demands of a pandemic we can forget the basics, or set them aside, for the immediate pressure of patient care.

- Take care of your body. Diet, sleep, exercise and limiting the use of alcohol are all beneficial.
- Consider learning simple techniques to relax and manage anxiety. Please see below for a list of useful apps, websites and online sources of psychological support.
- If there are particular things which are difficult, remember strong feelings are normal, and will ease with time.
- Link in with your families and loved ones. Let them look after you too.
- Remember this is a time of uncertainty and stress. Be kind to yourself, and allow your distressing emotions to pass.

## Interacting with patients and the public

This is an unusual and stressful situation for everyone. It is highly probable that people in hospitals, clinics or receiving community support will be stressed, anxious and in some cases scared.

- Be aware of our own and others' stress levels. Patients and the public will understandably be stressed and worried at this time and this will likely affect the way we are treated and spoken to. By being aware of their stress, and by using the skills from our de-escalation training, with understanding and compassion, we will hopefully help contain their distress and defuse a difficult situation.
- Providing patients and the public with up-to-date information is helpful. When people are highly stressed, however, it may be more beneficial just to listen to and validate their concerns and worries.
- Patients with mental health difficulties may experience an increase in distress which may manifest in greater reassurance seeking, more visible displays of distress, or a relapse in their mental state. This will be difficult for all concerned (patient, carers and staff). It is important to be mindful of the

difficulties that the patient is going through and retain compassion for them, while addressing their needs. Covid-19 has created a lot of uncertainty, which in turn increases anxiety. Recognising this as a normal response and helping to manage or reduce it will be more achievable, rather than trying to remove or stop the anxiety entirely. Use the vast amounts of anxiety management and relaxation resources that are available to construct balanced intervention/care plans.

- Within the limitations of the guidance on management of Covid-19, try to keep good routines for patients in wards, with a variety of activities being available across the day. Reduce the opportunity for unhelpful levels of worry/rumination, while also recognising the need for privacy and alone time for patients.
- Try to be aware of any cognitive, neurological or physical ailments that may impair communication, and adjust communication styles accordingly. These conditions can make the world a difficult and anxiety-provoking place at the best of times, and anxiety about Covid-19 will likely exacerbate this. Distress in both carers and patients may be common. Like with any other patient group, approaching the distress with compassion, sensitivity and understanding is likely to help. You may need to give more time for information to be processed/expressed, and you may need to simplify communication, or be a little more patient and possibly offer more reassurance/encouragement. Asking family members and carers about the individual and getting a sense of their needs and abilities will help in making the necessary adjustments for patients.

**Mindset and coping:** There are some habits of mind identified in research that can support our resilience.

- Maintaining a sense of hope is important.
- Focusing on what is within our control and what we can do is helpful.
- Try to accept that while we and the system are doing our best, there will be times when the outcome is not what we would wish, or can reasonably prevent.
- Take pride in achievements, no matter how small they may feel. Acknowledge and praise others when they do things that are positive and good. Take care of the little things first! Acknowledge when your team does something well and allow that to be emotionally rewarding.
- Some people find cultivating a sense of altruism helpful. Recognise that our actions – individually and collectively, including working in different ways and potentially experiencing additional distress – have a direct impact on those we care for, and the ability of the wider community to manage.
- Reach out. However well we prepare, we can all find particular incidents personally difficult. Anyone is capable of feeling overwhelmed and we have a duty to care for ourselves. Seek support if you feel that Covid-19 is affecting your ability to meet your responsibilities. There are multiple sources of support. Speak to your line manager in the first instance.
- Check on your colleagues to see how they're coping. They may seem OK on the outside, but we won't know unless we ask.
- If your colleagues are away from work, or are self-isolating, they are still part of the team. Maintain contact and, if appropriate, find tasks that maintain everyone's involvement.

The Intensive Care Society has some great resources and posters about coping with coronavirus as a professional and also ways you can look after yourself:

<https://www.ics.ac.uk/ICS/Education/Wellbeing/ICS/Wellbeing.aspx?hkey=92348f51-a875-4d87-8ae4-245707878a5c>

It's really important to check in with yourself and check if you are ok. See the graphic on the next page:

# AM I OK?

**1** Do you regularly feel **DISCONNECTED** from the relationship of caring for the patient, family, and colleagues?



**2** Do you regularly feel **EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION** - like you have nothing left to give?

**3** Do you regularly feel **A LACK OF FEELING OF ACCOMPLISHMENT** or feeling **INEFFECTIVE** in what you do?



If you answered YES to all three, consider talking to your line manager or someone you trust about the impact of your work. You may want a referral to your local employee wellbeing service.



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[www.ics.ac.uk](http://www.ics.ac.uk)

## General self-help about managing your own mental health and sleep

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-problems-introduction/self-care/>

<https://www.samh.org.uk/about-mental-health/self-help-and-wellbeing>

<http://mentalhealthsupport.co.uk/ns/>

Make sure you use the supports available and recognise when you need to take a rest or get extra support. If you are struggling, speak to your line manager in the first instance. We have a formal process in getting you the help and support that you need.

Adapted from material developed by NHS Grampian