



Cardiac Neurodevelopmental Outcome Collaborative

Help for the Helpers:

Healthy Coping and Stress Management Resources for Frontline Healthcare Professionals during the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic advances across the globe, frontline healthcare professionals in hospitals and clinics worldwide are continuing to provide critical services to vulnerable children and families affected by serious medical conditions, including congenital heart disease (CHD).

In this time of crisis, physicians, surgeons, nurses, and other essential medical workers are among our most valuable resources – they are the helpers who put themselves at risk so that others can live.

Outlined below are resources, developed and coalesced from other sources by the Cardiac Neurodevelopmental Outcome Collaborative (CNOC), to support healthcare professionals in coping with stress and fear, and drawing on the strength and resilience that will help us all as we navigate through these anxious and uncertain times.

Coping strategies for healthcare professionals

Whether you are a physician, nurse, administrator, or other member of the medical team, you may be experiencing high levels of worry, stress, and anxiety about the health of your patients, your families, and yourselves.

Anxiety is normal and expectable under the circumstances. Healthcare professionals are used to having answers. You are used to displaying confidence, even in the face of uncertainty. But you are also human. **Recognize that the anxiety you may be experiencing now is not a sign of weakness or incompetence. It's a sign that you are tuned-in appropriately to the uncertainty and stress of the times.** It's also something you can take steps to control. There are things you can do to help you manage anxiety. Here are 10 suggestions:

- 1) **Take 5 deep breaths.** Breathe deeply from your belly, not your chest. (see: <https://www.uofmhealth.org/health-library/uz2255>)
- 2) **Take care of yourself.**
 - ✓ Eat healthy
 - ✓ Get enough sleep
 - ✓ Avoid excessive consumption of caffeine, sweets, and alcohol
 - ✓ Take breaks for self-care throughout the workday
 - ✓ Get some fresh air
 - ✓ Get some exercise (take a walk around the block; take the stairs instead of the elevator)
- 3) **Maintain good self-monitoring.** There is a reason flight attendants tell passengers to “Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.” You need to take care of yourself before you can effectively take care of those who depend on you. For this reason, it is important to conduct periodic self-check-ins to monitor your anxiety and stress levels – to ensure that you are able to think clearly and effectively – and to identify times when you may need to take a break.

- 4) **Share the load.** In the midst of social distancing and limited providers and resources, it may sometimes feel as though you are working alone. Remember that you are part of a team of people who are all working toward common goals. Be kind to one another. Also try to keep in mind that it can be hard to accurately estimate how much others are doing. Research has shown that people are prone to over-estimating their own contributions, while underestimating the contributions of others. Your teammates may be doing more than you realize.
- 5) **Be present.** Life is very distracting right now. In addition to worrying about work and family, we find ourselves constantly bombarded by news and policy updates. Whether at work or at home, strive to be fully present in the moment. Work hard to give your full attention to the patient or colleague or task in front of you. At home, to the extent possible, try to strike a healthy balance between *staying up-to-date* and *disconnecting* from your phone, pager, computer, and tablet so that you can give your full attention to your friends and family.
- 6) **Practice mindfulness:** Relaxation and mindfulness exercises can help to calm your body and mind. Many of these exercises can be done in just a few minutes and can become part of your daily routine. Several apps are offering free breathing, mindfulness, and guided meditation exercises (<https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>, <https://blog.calm.com/take-a-deep-breath>). Think about other activities that you find soothing and try to do at least one of these every day.
- 7) **Stay socially connected:** Even during this time of social distancing, it remains important to maintain social connections with the people you care about. At work, this means finding those small moments to talk to your colleagues – even if just to check-in and see how they’re doing. You can also reach out to family and friends, even for a just a minute or two, to hear a friendly voice and remind yourself that they’re OK.
- 8) **Control what you can:** A lot of things feel outside of our control at the moment. But it is still possible to maintain some sense of normalcy and control over at least some things in your life. Try to stick to routines as much as possible. Routines and predictability will help you feel more in control during this time of uncertainty.
- 9) **Be gentle with yourself.** Be kind to yourself. Be patient with yourself. Give yourself a break.
- 10) **Talk to a professional.** Knowing when to seek some extra support is a sign of strength. Many mental health professionals are now offering therapy and supportive services virtually through telehealth (video sessions). If you are experiencing anxiety, panic, or depressed mood that is impacting your daily functioning (caregiving/work responsibilities, sleep, appetite), professional mental health services may be needed. Symptoms to watch for include: severe attention difficulties that impact your work, significant sleep disruptions, significant changes in appetite, and/or feeling of hopelessness. To find a provider, call your insurance company and ask about the availability of telehealth services.

In addition, many hospitals have psychologists, social workers, and other mental health professionals on staff who may be able to offer telehealth services or guidance on where to locate these services. Some hospitals have employee assistance programs that offer counseling. Reach out to your administrator to ask about services provided at your hospital.

These links provide more information about managing stress and anxiety related to COVID-19:

- Sustaining the well-being of healthcare personnel during coronavirus (Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress):
https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_Well_Being_Healthcare_Personnel_during.pdf.pdf
- Psychological research to help people deal with COVID-19 (American Psychological Association): <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/03/covid-19-research-findings>
- Caring for our caregivers (American Medical Association): <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/caring-our-caregivers-during-covid-19>
- Managing healthcare workers' stress associated with COVID-19 (US Department of Veterans Affairs): https://www.ptsd.va.gov/covid/COVID_healthcare_workers.asp
- Mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health): <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19#coping>
- Anxiety and COVID-19 video for healthcare providers (Montefiore): <https://vimeo.com/398138843/b4dc58fcf5>
- Coronavirus anxiety – helpful expert tips and resources (Anxiety and Depression Association of America): <https://adaa.org/finding-help/coronavirus-anxiety-helpful-resources?zs=3FEBb&zl=xVu12>
- F.A.C.E.C.O.V.I.D. – How to respond effectively to coronavirus YouTube video (Dr. Russ Harris):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmvNCdpHUYM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3xNWKDdXN1FINVV5GftBquSCvWXPTeproFy1PTLlokZUPEiVSj1QWZJSI>