

Psychological First Aid for Frontline Health Care Providers During COVID-19

A QUICK GUIDE TO WELLNESS



 Medical
Team

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ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK

Remember the end of February 2020? You were probably thinking of going on your well-deserved trip to Mexico, complaining about traffic, wishing you could spend more time at home, discarding gloves without an afterthought and making fun of preppers? Then, all changed, in a way that none of us had anticipated (ok well, maybe the preppers).

The idea for this workbook came to me after 2 days of information overload researching resources on how to psychologically support frontline workers, especially health professionals. While there is a plethora of excellent resources out there, the idea was to create a short, “one-stop shop,” workbook that can serve as a stepping stone to other more comprehensive resources.

This is the workbook you want to read if you are feeling overwhelmed, tired and in need of some humour. Yes humour. The COVID-19 pandemic we're facing isn't a laughing matter, but our ability to connect through humour is part of our humanity. Research has shown that laughter, especially for individuals working in emotionally charged environments, reduces their stress levels, increases their capacity to be present and their resilience. Seems fitting for health care professionals, don't you think?

As in all current endeavours, this workbook tries to be as inclusive as possible. Information presented comes from a variety of evidence-based approaches and is not centred on a sole theoretical orientation. This is not the time for division but unity. Consequently, I have included helpful techniques from Emotionally-Focused Therapy, Emotion-Focused Therapy, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (including third wave), Acceptance-Commitment Therapy, Internal Family Systems, Positive Psychology and other relevant approaches. The key is to provide a menu of evidence-informed options; you can then decide which one to apply based on your preferences and context. You may choose to read the workbook all at once, or, if you are pressed for time, go to the sections that are most relevant to you (as you will see the notion of choice and flexibility will be present throughout this manual).

This workbook also could not have been developed without the help and wisdom of several of my colleagues. I would like to highlight the contribution of Dr. Anita Gupta, clinical, health and rehabilitation psychologist for her expertise and generosity.

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- Strengths and resilience of health care providers
- Common pitfalls for health care providers when attempting to cope

CHECK-UP AND STRATEGIES FOR WITHIN

- Mind, body and emotional check-up
- Quick and effective strategies to increase your personal well-being

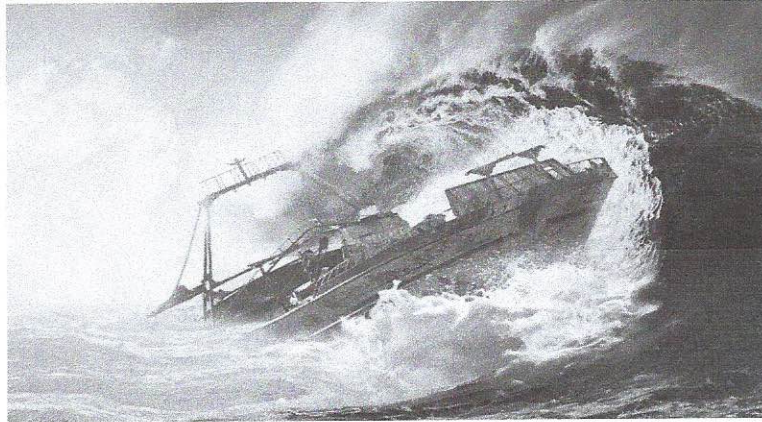
CHECK-UP AND STRATEGIES FOR BETWEEN

- Relational and environmental check-up
- Quick and effective strategies to increase your relational well-being

OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Last remarks
- List of helpful resources

TAKING CARE OF YOUR BOAT



I would first like to start with an image I use with my cancer patients to help reorient where we focus our energy in time of tremendous adversity (seems like facing a global pandemic applies).

Imagine that life is a journey on the ocean and you are the boat. Most of us spend our lives trying to control the waves. Unfortunately, while being quite compelling, this exercise is futile. We do not control the waves to come (size or frequency). If we spend most of our energy trying to prevent the waves from coming, we can get exhausted and disappointed. We become resentful when we compare ourselves to others who appear to have a calmer ocean to navigate or feel ashamed of ourselves for struggling with tidal waves. What I am proposing is not to become hopeless and defeated about the lack of control we have over the waves but to redirect our attention and energy towards the boat. You see, in this quest to control the ocean, most of us have forgotten to take care of **our boats**.

If you nurture your ship and invite others to join you on your journey, then when you hit a wave head on (not if, but when), you have a fighting chance to get through it, bounce back and potentially grow from the experience.

Now for frontline workers, I would like to add to this image:

A sinking ship can't help other vessels (patients, family, community) steer the course. A captain at the bottom of the sea seems far less helpful, don't you think? Taking care of yourself is not selfish but an act of kindness towards us all who depend on you.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

COMMON REACTIONS DURING CRISIS

Ramping up to crisis

- Anticipatory anxiety (what if ?)
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Frustrated with decision-makers (system)
- Irritation with communication issues
- Perceived lack of control
- Uncertainty about role, tasks or what guidelines applies (vs general public)
- Information overload/oversaturation
- Stress related to trial and error of dealing with an unprecedented event
- Sleep problems and anxiety

In the thick of it

- Feeling conflicted between responsibilities and obligations (professional, family, community)
- Tensions with coworkers (tension between professions, specialties, hierarchies)
- Us vs them (general public vs health care providers)
- Ethical and moral dilemmas
- Helplessness and exhaustion
- Difficulty meeting the demands of the workload
- Fear of infecting self or family members
- Anxiety related to knowing colleagues who are infected at work
- Being in "go mode" (task-oriented, survival mode)
- Feeling detached
- Increased irritability

When the dust settles

- Feelings of exhaustion
- Recovery period
- Potential for trauma-related reactions (for ex., PTSD, depression and anxiety)
- Potential growth and lessons-learned

The main takeaways from this page are the following:

- If you are experiencing stress and exhaustion, you are most likely a normal human being with a nervous system and a brain (welcome to humanity).
- Your reactions to COVID-19 are most likely not going to be linear or static. You may experience a back and forth of these experiences (sometimes feeling on top of it and sometimes feeling like you are struggling to catch-up). Hence, the importance of checking-in with yourself (see next sections).