



Care for Healthcare Heroes

Mitigating Employer Risks and Building a Mentally Healthy Workforce Post COVID-19

Healthcare workers globally are in the line of fire, performing extraordinary work in a highly stressed, rapidly changing environment and in some cases, without enough resources to fully be able to treat patients suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic. How will their emotional, physical and mental well-being be affected long-term?

As a healthcare organization, there is support you can provide now and down the road to your workers, including when the acute phase of the pandemic subsides.

The Current State of Healthcare Worker’s Mental Health:

Across the globe, healthcare workers’ mental health is being tested as they fight on the front lines to protect the public under extremely stressful situations. Frequently lacking the supplies and space normally received in their facilities, they face difficult decisions daily, only to go home to the worry of potentially infecting their loved ones. Many workers are experiencing insomnia, depression, anxiousness, and sometimes, fear.

A study published in March, 2020, in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), quantifies the mental health impact examining 1,257 healthcare workers caring for COVID-19 patients in 34 hospitals in China. A large proportion of them report experiencing symptoms of depression (50 percent), anxiety (45 percent), insomnia (34 percent), and psychological distress (71.5 percent). Of those studied, women and nurses report especially severe symptoms. JAMA mentions the concerns healthcare professionals have can be organized into five requests for their employer: “hear me, protect me, prepare me, support me, and care for me.”

Amidst all the challenges during this pandemic, employers within the healthcare industry must address support for their employee’s mental health. This outline guides healthcare employers with tangible recommendations for appropriate pre-crisis planning, in-crisis solutions, and preparations for the post-COVID era.

Planning

Fight Stress through Proactive Measures & Prevention Techniques

- **Pandemic Management Plan** – Be sure to have a plan in place to tackle crises like COVID-19 or similar pandemics. A known and well-executed plan makes employees feel more secure in how a company is taking care of them during a crisis.
 - Establish a crisis management leadership team (task force) who is responsible for leading the effort. This serves as a centralized structure responsible for consistent direction and execution of procedures throughout the organization and ongoing.
 - Ensure clear and consistent communication channels. Be visible to staff and communicate with a regular cadence, through multiple avenues (text, email, staff meetings, and intranet sites).
 - Inventory PPE and other necessary vital equipment. Secure secondary channels of procurement in advance.
- **Formal Written Staff Support Policy** – Develop a written document outlining how support will be given to employees, how management will support the work they do, and what management will do to create a supportive work environment. This should be shared with employees upon hire, and continuously reviewed during their employment.
- **Front Line Stress Control Teams** – Designate team leaders and qualified mental health trained staff whose role it is to be in the trenches and work specifically with individuals when a crisis occurs.
- **Training to Increase Self-Efficacy** – Provide employees with training to support them in managing and coping with a variety of situations, similar but not limited to the following:
 - Coping with high stress situations
 - Managing limited inventories
 - Handling mass fatalities
 - Preparing for the needs of their own families if employees must stay at work or be quarantined
 - Possible separation from and concern about family members
 - Fears about infection and subsequent implications for self, patients, and family
 - Inner conflict about competing needs and demands
 - Appropriate immediate responses to traumatic incidents
 - When to seek back-up support and specialized resources
- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** – Establish a partnership and make employees aware of this service in advance of the need.
- **Health Plan or Carrier Mental Health Resources** – Health plan partners or carriers may provide resources to assist employees in coping with mental health needs. Discover if any hotlines, coaching, telehealth, virtual therapy, or more is available.

- **Holistic Wellness Program** – Establish a well-rounded program that prepares employees in advance to be as healthy as possible. The plan should focus on physical health, nutrition, exercise and mental health – including stress reduction, mindfulness tools, resources and education.

The Now

Combat Mental Health Struggles During the Crisis, Real-Time

During the crisis care givers will be prioritizing their needs over others. Self-care must be promoted graciously and in a stigma free manner. This is why it is important for employers to be proactive in delivering and promoting support care services before the crisis. It is important employees feel they can elect these services with no fear of negative consequences.

- **Mental Health Hotlines** – In addition to an EAP and health plan resources, ensure employees are aware of options for immediate help such as the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) Helpline at 800-950-NAMI, or in a crisis can text "NAMI" to 741741. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration has a 24/7 distress helpline, reachable at 1-800-985-5990.
- **Crisis Support Services** – Consider bringing in a project-based support service who can be onsite and available to meet with employees individually, both proactively to help prevent burnout, as well as, when needed to talk through a stressful day or particularly difficult situation.
- **On-Call Volunteer Therapists** – Partner with local psychologists, psychiatrists or licensed therapists who might want to volunteer their time to help healthcare staff. See an example of how this worked in the Ontario, Canada area [here](#).
- **Teletherapy** – Consider providing employees with a virtual avenue to get therapy. Virtual therapy can provide immediate text/talk based solutions to address mental health needs. There are a number of virtual therapy options available who can provide immediate text/talk based solutions to address mental health needs. Several national providers of these services are offering no cost options to healthcare workers for extended periods of time to help them through the mental health challenges they may be experiencing.
- **Social or Religious Support** – Religion or spirituality can be important for employees coping through a crisis. Studies indicate religious belief and practice can help prevent depression. Encourage and support employees to seek counsel from their own religious or spiritual advisors.
- **Childcare or Eldercare Support** – Employees might need onsite care for children or parents while working. Connect employees to quality care providers who offer qualified care takers for family members.
- **Healthy Food Delivery for On Shift and Take-Home** – Partner with local restaurants who can bring in healthy food and snacks, giving employees a welcome reprieve when they have

time for a break. Meals set up outside, ready for purchase and take home would also be a convenient option.

- **Supervisor Monitoring & Encouragement** – Frequent team manager check-ins to look for signs of stress, or referral to help/crisis resources. Team managers should monitor the functioning of their team for signs of conflict, or other evidence of burnout.
- **On Shift Protocols to Help Ease Stress:**
 - Stress management breaks
 - Buddy system: two employees partner together to support each other, and monitor each other's stress, workload, and safety
 - Encouraging "time-outs" to walk away from high intensity situations
 - Foster a spirit of teamwork, patience, empathy and hope to inspire employees

Long Term

Treatment & Support to Manage Mental Health in the Aftermath

When COVID-19 is under control and the worst of it seems over, those caring for patients will need an adjustment or reintegration period. To help manage the mental health impact COVID-19 has had on healthcare professionals, employers should prioritize providing supportive resources to their employees during this reintegration. Mental health treatment is not just something that will be needed post-crisis, but rather it must be put at the forefront, and be made available long into the future, as the post-traumatic stress associated with the pandemic may be far-reaching.

Resources to consider:

- **EAP & Behavioral Therapy** – Continue heavy promotion of these resources.
- **Teletherapy** – No time doesn't mean there is no way to get help. Continue promoting teletherapy options.
- **Stand-Alone Behavioral Health Providers** – More intensive and accessible therapy and treatment options could be carved out of health plan and EAP to expedite access and allow employees to get help faster.
- **Schedule Time off for Re-Integration/Adjustment** – Consider allowing flexible PTO or short-term sabbaticals with the opportunity for employees to come back to work after they are recharged and have had time to reconnect with friends and family.
- **Check-in System with Team or Manager** – Formalize a process to evaluate individual employee progress and identify where additional support may be needed.
- **Onsite Support Groups** – Consider organizing onsite support groups to allow employees to share experiences and talk through adjustment issues.

- **Awareness Campaigns** – Heavily promote options, including avoiding negative coping strategies such as: use of alcohol, inappropriate use of legally obtained prescription drugs, or illicit drugs.
- **Train Leaders on Mental Health in the Workplace** – Provide formal training for managers, supervisors and team leaders to become aware of the signals of mental health, understand how to reach out, and how to appropriately refer employees to available resources.

Summary

The mental state of healthcare providers cannot be an afterthought. Although these strategies cannot happen overnight, you may use this outline to craft a plan of action and move quickly towards an organizational mental health strategy. As a healthcare organization, you should incorporate the preventive measures (crisis management plans and partners), in-crisis measures (hotlines, behavioral health, front line stress identification and management), and long-term treatment (therapy, medication and reintegration plans). The mental health system is not prepared to manage the demand for mental health support after such a mass crisis. Employers can take a proactive stance to ensure there is a plan in place to grow and build on over time. Unlike the inability to find PPE to help protect workers physically, employers can start to prepare for their employee's mental health now by putting the right resources in place to take care of healthcare's greatest assets, our heroes.

Resources:

- OSHA: [Resilience Resources for Emergency Response](#)
- Managing Stress in Humanitarian Workers: [Guideline for Good Practice](#)
- Canadian Psychological Association, Fact Sheet: [Coping with and Preventing COVID-19](#)
- SAMHSA Tips: [Preventing and Managing Stress](#) & [Adjusting to Life at Home](#)
- Interim NIOSH Training for Emergency Responders: [Reducing Risks Associated with Long Work Hours](#)
- CDC: [Coping with Disaster or Traumatic Event](#) & [Tips for Taking Care of Yourself](#)
- National Center for PTSD: [Managing Healthcare Workers' Stress Associated with COVID-19 Virus Outbreak](#)

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