



Stress management and COVID-19

Self-care guidance for healthcare workers on the front line

by **Sheila M. Arquette, RPh.**, Executive Director of the National Association of Specialty Pharmacy (NASP)

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WellSky thanks Sheila M. Arquette, RPh for writing this article. Sheila is the executive director of the National Association of Specialty Pharmacy (NASP), which is based in Washington, D.C. and is the only national nonprofit association representing all stakeholders in the specialty pharmacy industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an extraordinarily stressful time for everyone, especially healthcare providers. We have suddenly been thrust into living and operating in extended “crisis mode” and feeling more fragile and vulnerable than ever. Front line healthcare professionals are particularly sensitive to increased levels of distress and anxiety as they strive to balance the duty of caring for patients with concerns about their own well-being and that of their family and friends.

First and foremost, know that it’s normal to have strong feelings and emotions, including fear and anxiety. These feelings are inevitable as we turn on the news, hearing stories of death, economic loss, grief, and sadness. But without proper coping strategies,

the intensity of these emotions can make it difficult to care for patients. How do we continue to help people when we are in distress?

This pandemic is a time to care for others and ourselves. Your well-being and emotional resilience are essential as you work to help your patients and community through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking care of yourself

Taking steps to manage your stress and any anxiety you may be experiencing is just as important as taking care of your physical health. Below are some strategies and resources to help manage your mental well-being while caring for patients during the pandemic or any other crisis.

Acknowledge and monitor your feelings. You will have reactions to the increased stressors you encounter. These reactions are NOT an indication of weakness. Anyone helping during this time is susceptible to **secondary traumatic stress**. As a healthcare professional, you are especially vulnerable.

Please note

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- **CMS response to Coronavirus and latest program guidance**
<https://www.cms.gov/About-CMS/Agency-Information/Emergency/EPRO/Current-Emergencies/Current-Emergencies-page>
- **CDC interim infection prevention and control recommendations**
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/infection-control/control-recommendations.html>

Watch for symptoms of depression/stress disorder such as prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping, intrusive memories, and feelings of hopelessness. Talk to a trusted colleague or supervisor. Be open to seeking professional help if symptoms persist or worsen over time.

Schedule time to de-stress and engage in activities that bring you joy, even if just for a moment. Taking a break, even for a few minutes, can be calming.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, take a few moments to simply breathe. Even just 30 seconds of steady inhaleds and exhaleds can help you establish a sense of calm.

Transition from your workday by commuting to your home without listening to the news. Instead, listen to something you enjoy, such as music, an audiobook, or a podcast.

Eat, sleep, and exercise. These three things help both our mental and physical health. A quick five-minute walk can improve energy and focus. Also, limit alcohol and caffeine consumption. You need to stay healthy so you can continue to support your family and your patients.

Step away from your computer and phone from time to time and limit the amount of news and social media you consume, as it can become overwhelming. Focus on what you CAN control. When you do read or listen to the news, seek information from reputable sources.

Stay in contact with family and friends in ways that are safe and compliant with social distancing guidelines.

Be of service to others. It makes not only those we help feel good, but also ourselves. Many are finding a sense of purpose by checking on elderly neighbors, sewing masks, and sending food or supplies to those who need it.

Rely on your fellow healthcare workers – they are your social support and can be there for you if you let them. And don't forget to thank your colleagues for their sacrifices. Together, we are all stronger.

Gain strength by remembering the importance and meaning of your work. Despite the current challenges and frustrations, yours is a crucial and noble calling – taking care of those in need in a time of considerable uncertainty.

Common symptoms of secondary traumatic stress



Cognitive

- Lowered concentration
- Apathy
- Rigid thinking
- Perfectionism
- Preoccupation with trauma



Emotional

- Guilt
- Anger
- Numbness
- Sadness
- Helplessness



Behavioral

- Withdrawal
- Sleep disturbance
- Appetite change
- Hyper-vigilance
- Elevated startle response



Physical

- Increased heart rate
- Difficulty breathing
- Muscle and joint pain
- Impaired immune system
- Increased severity of medical concerns

Source: US Department of Health & Human Services Administration for Children & Families

Taking care of your staff

We all need support and care to get through this time, and that includes your staff and colleagues. Below are some ways you can show your peers compassion and demonstrate that you're focused on their overall health through this challenging time.

- When possible and within applicable legal limits, rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions. Partner inexperienced workers with more experienced colleagues who can provide support, monitor stress, and reinforce safety practices. Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member affected by the outbreak.
- Provide staff with access to sources of psychosocial support.
- Regularly and supportively monitor the well-being and psychosocial status of staff to identify risks and emerging issues and respond to needs accordingly.
- Create an environment of open communication and encourage staff to speak freely about their concerns. Remind staff of how to access your employee assistance program and encourage peer support among colleagues.

We understand that for healthcare workers in particular, the days and nights during this pandemic can be long, tiring, and emotionally taxing. Taking care of yourself and your colleagues is as important as taking care of your patients, so please take advantage of the resources linked below and share them with your team. Your efforts and the sacrifices you are making to take care of your patients do not go unnoticed, and we wish you all the best as you continue to provide care during this incredibly difficult time.

Sources

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About the author



Sheila M. Arquette, RPh, is the Executive Director of the National Association of Specialty Pharmacy (NASP). She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Pharmacy from the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Pharmacy. She has extensive practical and leadership experience in retail pharmacy, hospital pharmacy, long-term care consulting and dispensing, in addition to managed care, PBM operations and specialty pharmacy. She is a regular speaker and participant at national pharmacy conferences, roundtables and industry meetings. Sheila has been appointed to the University of Pittsburg's Master of Science in Pharmacy Business Administration (MSPBA) Executive Steering Board and is the host of the NASP Podcast on the Pharmacy Podcast Network. Sheila was elected to the NASP Board of Directors and received the NASP Distinguished Service Award in September 2016. She also is a long-standing member of AMCP.



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