



MENTAL HEALTH OF MEDICAL STAFF DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research-based recommendations for
medical institutions and medical staff

CENTER FOR PSYCHOTRAUMATOLOGY

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MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC

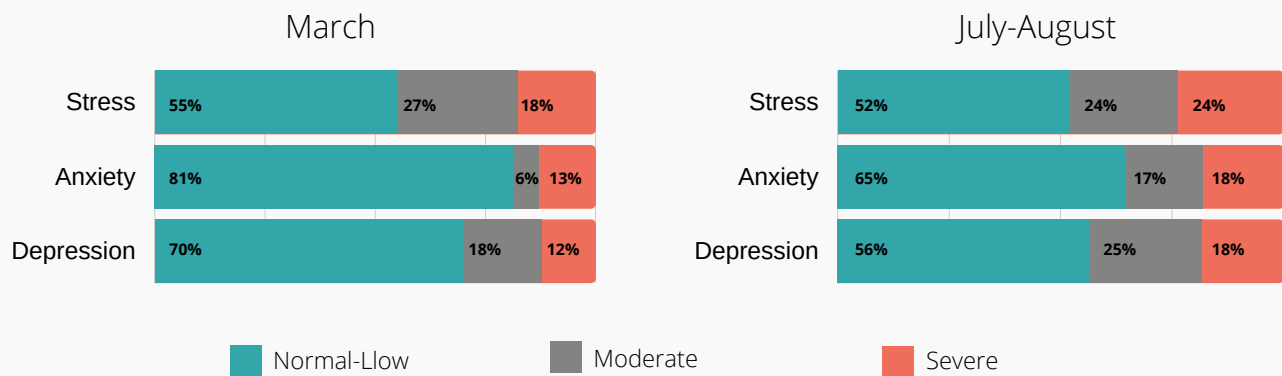
During the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers face an unprecedented situation in their professional environment. Rising demands on health care facilities, tightening, ever-changing and often unusual working conditions, and staff shortages increase the risk of burnout syndrome among medical staff as well as the risk of depression and anxiety. Stress at work during a pandemic affect the health of both the medical staff and their loved ones (1, 2).

A report published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in April 2020 indicates that in 52 countries 22,073 medical workers have been diagnosed with the virus. According to a study conducted in China, 23% of doctors who worked directly with COVID-19 patients experienced anxiety, and more than 27% experienced constant stress (6). In the study of psychological reactions of doctors and nurses, depression was observed in 50.4% and anxiety in 44.6% of respondents.

“THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MEDICAL STAFF DURING A PANDEMIC IS AFFECTED NOT ONLY BY WORK-RELATED STRESS BUT ALSO BY INCREASING ANXIETY, DISTRUST IN THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM AND DISSATISFACTION WITH MEDICAL SERVICES IN THE GENERAL POPULATION.”

According to a study conducted by the researchers from the Vilnius University Centre for Psychotraumatology (PTC) in March-April 2020, a large number of medical staff working in intensive care units experienced moderate to severe stress, anxiety and depression at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than a quarter of the interviewed staff members experienced a constant fear of becoming infected or transmitting the virus to their loved ones. As many as 43% of respondents were already thinking about changing professions at the beginning of the pandemic. Respondents most often chose social connections as a means to overcome stress i.e. support from colleagues and family members. However, it is worrying that as many as 22.7% of the respondents chose alcohol to overcome work-related stress, and only 8% reported sought professional help.

PREVALENCE OF STRESS, ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONG MEDICAL STAFF Survey data



VU Center for Psychotraumatology study findings

A second survey conducted by the researchers from PTC at 4-5 months since the start of the pandemic (July-August 2020) revealed increasing stress reactions and anxiety among medical staff, despite the reduced pandemic wave and relaxed coronavirus control restrictions in summer of 2020.

The survey by PTC in July 2020 was conducted not only in Lithuania's but also in the United Kingdom's medical institutions. A comparative analysis of the mental health problems experienced showed that despite the higher number of patients and the dramatic increase in the mortality of intensive care patients, the level of anxiety and depression in the medical staff was lower in the United Kingdom than in Lithuania. This can be explained by the fact that professionals in the UK had significantly easier access to psychological help and, in addition, hospitals had systematic strategies for managing work-related stress.

Studies in other countries show that providing medical staff working with COVID-19 patients with psychological aid increases staff resilience to stress and reduces anxiety levels (4, 5). WHO's recommendations and the strategic documents for pandemic management in various parts of the world emphasize the availability of psychological assistance to front-line personnel in the fight against COVID-19. Recognition of the stress experienced by medical staff and psychological support should be an integral part of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The following guidelines are intended for employers and medical staff of treatment facilities and their units to avoid the effects of ongoing stress reactions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS, FOR ASSISTING THE STAFF DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Main goals of employers

Healthcare workers are particularly vulnerable to the extreme situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Negative experiences and psychological stress experienced by medical staff often become uncontrollable and cause mental and physical symptoms of long-term stress that affect staff's motivation, work quality, and quality of life. Legislations obliges employers to assess and manage work-related psychosocial risks faced by their workers.

The main goal of managing the stressors and work changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic should be to **organize work activities taking into account the physical and emotional capabilities of the staff** and **to create an emotionally healthy work environment**. This can be achieved by:

1. Timely, frequent, and appropriate communication of information to staff. The stress and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic are exacerbated by a lack of information and the dissemination of misleading, incomprehensible information. Frequent and understandable knowledge, objective facts, and a clear work strategy for the unit and organization can reduce anxiety about changing working conditions. As employees become more aware of the changes as well as goals and expectations placed on them, tolerance for temporary transitional problems increases.

Make sure your employees know why and what changes will take place in your unit or facility during a COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Training of staff and assistance in acquiring new practical skills related to the COVID-19 pandemic increases the sense of control of the situation in workers, which is one of the universally recognized ways of preventing stress at work. Regular training on the use of safety precautions, physical isolation measures, and the real risk of infection in the treatment of COVID-19 patients is required. This can increase the sense of security of medical staff and dispel some of the fears associated with the threat of getting sick or infecting your loved ones.

The development and distribution of comprehensive and accessible sources of information and training material to employees can help to maintain the acquired skills and apply them in critical situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS, FOR ASSISTING THE STAFF DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

3. Development of mutual support skills in the team. Creating a supportive and effort-friendly work environment is one of the most important managerial challenges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Stress due to sudden and unexpected changes can be avoided by increasing the involvement of employees in the decision-making related to their work. Managers must ensure that employees' views are taken into account in decision-making and that they are able to express their concerns and ask questions without feeling threatened. Managers should encourage members of the medical staff to work together to support each other. Encourage employees to talk about their emotions and share their experiences. Demonstrate to your team members by setting an example of maintaining positive, sincere and open communication between employees.

Giving feedback and discussing emergencies is essential in sharing responsibility for the made decisions and for avoiding feelings of helplessness in the treatment of the most severely ill COVID-19 patients.

4. Improving the psychological climate in the institution and its departments. It is important to change attitudes towards mental health problems and promote psychological well-being in medical institutions. During a COVID-19 pandemic, every worker experiencing an emotional crisis should be encouraged to seek psychological help. Assessing the psychological stress experienced by employees and training managers on how to recognize staff stress reactions can help identify pre-existing problems and find solutions for increasing staff resilience to anxiety and fear in critical situations. The introduction of tools for the assessment of stress responses is essential. Talk to staff regularly about the stress of a COVID-19 pandemic. Listen to and involve employees in COVID-19-related issues such as childcare, family accommodation, incapacity for work, the safety of loved ones, and health issues related to COVID-19. Discuss how the organization could help employees who are facing problems outside of work.

Improve the availability of psychological support for staff dealing directly with COVID-19 patients, as well as the distribution of information on support resources. Psychological assistance should be made available to any employee of the treatment facility through both direct and remote counselling.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDICAL STAFF, ON HOW TO OVERCOME STRESS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

- 1. Let yourself feel.** It is normal to feel anxiety and stress in such threatening situations as the global COVID-19 pandemic. Accept the emotions you are experiencing and try to understand what is causing them. This is the first step to increasing stress resistance.
- 2. Identify which of the stressors you can control.** Learn to say no to unreasonably high job requirements. Set work priorities and take regular breaks during work. Slow down the pace of work if you feel it's too fast for you. Avoid reading too much negative information related to COVID-19.
- 3. Don't lose social connections.** Don't stop communicating with loved ones and friends - their support can be the most important pillar in difficult times. Identify people you can get support from. Talk to them. Try to share your feelings and experiences with colleagues.
- 4. Take time for yourself and your hobbies.** Look for activities that give you joy and help you get rid of negative thoughts.
- 5. Take care of your physical health.** Try to eat healthy food and exercise regularly. Try to avoid heavy alcohol or psychotropic substance use, smoking. Contact a professional if you suspect that your harmful habits are becoming addictive.
- 6. Take care of your emotional health.** Recognize frustrating emotions and seek psychological help promptly. Increased irritability, sleep disturbances, constant anxiety, and depressed mood may be signs of burnout or post-traumatic stress.

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