

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CARE TO WIN THE RACE WITH COVID-19

None of us have experienced anything like this before in our own lives. The Covid-19 pandemic presents a challenge of global reach and significance. It is almost impossible, at the moment, to have any reprieve from the constant flow of new information about the worldwide spread of the virus. No one knows how it is going to pan out or how long it is going to last for and there is no manual or roadmap to help us navigate this ever changing landscape and the constantly evolving measures and guidelines.

The uncertainty surrounding coronavirus and its impact on our healthcare system and our professional as well as private lives is, for most of us, the hardest thing to handle. We don't know how bad things might get while we struggle to find balance between our own needs and the demands of the workplace. We, humans, despise uncertainty and shaky grounds.

It is normal to feel overwhelmed by something we cannot control. It is normal to feel anxious. It is normal to feel a whole range of emotions. Many of our colleagues might be experiencing conflict between their duties to family and to their patients and co-workers. For many in the community, including health workers, this pandemic is also causing severe financial stress. Social distancing, self-isolation, quarantine have created their own problems; they affect what we love to do, where we want to be, and who we want to be with. Let's be real, the world as we know has been turned upside down.

Many unanswered questions might be invading your thoughts. Will my family and I be safe? What will going to work look like when we will be at the peak of the crisis? What about the people that won't be candidate or won't respond to intensive treatment? How and where will they die? Alone, separated from their loved ones, surrounded by people covered in PPE. The exact opposite of what good palliative care strives for.

Dr Penny Cotton, one of our team's consultants, made a powerful comment during one of our preparatory meetings about the Covid-19 situation that truly hit home for me: 'This is going to be a marathon not a sprint'. Indeed, our physical and emotional resilience are going to be tested. If we want to last the distance we will need to take care of ourselves and each other. Individually, we each have resilience but we also have resilience together. There will be an end to this crisis and we will get through it together.

At the best of times dealing with issues associated with death and dying and cumulative loss impacts on the wellbeing of clinicians, whether they work regularly in that setting or not. With the extra pressures associated with The Covid-19 pandemic it will be even more important to practice self-care and constantly replenish our batteries. Here are some tips and routines you might choose to practice to manage your stress levels and improve your physical and mental wellbeing during this difficult period.

### How to calm the mind?

- Unplug: limit the intake of news and social media. Connect only to reliable sources of information, consider checking them once or twice a day for 20 minutes each time.
- Focus on what is within your power. A sense of personal control is key to resilience. Focus on things you can problem solve or find ways to let go of those you cannot.
- Focus on the present. Our minds have a tendency to fast-forward to the future and this is often exacerbated during times of stress. An antidote is to intentionally focus on the present. Practice mindfulness whenever you can even if it is only for a few moments.
- Focus on what is good, practice gratitude. I know that you might feel stretched to find the positives in such a situation but gratitude can make a big difference. Gratitude is effective because of its cyclical nature; when we are more aware of the things we are grateful for, we notice more things to be grateful for. In direct contrast to the "downward spiral" of depression and negative thinking, gratitude is an "upward spiral" to a better mood, more optimism, and greater performance. It is also surprisingly easy for gratitude to spread from one person to another, let's spread the gratitude virus! It makes us to feel more connected, it allows us to feel inspired and uplifted when we see wonderful acts of humanity, which motivates us to be more generous and giving to others.
- Laugh, another positively contagious thing to do! Laughing feels good, boosts our immune system, and helps us keep things in perspective.
- Humans are social animals. We're hardwired for connection. Stay in touch however you can with your loved ones however possible but don't let coronavirus dominate every conversation.

## Take care of your body

- Maintain a routine as best you can. Try to stick to your regular sleep, exercise and meal schedule. This can help you maintain a sense of normalcy.
- Get out in nature, if possible. Sunshine and fresh air always make you feel better. Go bushwalking.
- Find ways to exercise. Staying active will help you feel strong, relieve stress, and manage your mood. While the gym and group classes are out, you can still look online for exercise videos you can follow.
- Take up a relaxation practice. When stressors throw your nervous system out of balance, relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and yoga can bring you back into a state of equilibrium. You can use a meditation or mindfulness app or follow online yoga classes.
- Listen to music you enjoy and dance in your lounge room.
- Plant and tend your own garden literally as well as figuratively.

## Help others, it will make you feel better!

- It is well known that those who focus on others in need and support their communities, especially during times of crises, tend to be happier and healthier. Helping others not only makes a difference to your community but it can also support your own mental health and well-being. Doing kind and helpful acts for others can help you regain a sense of control over your life—as well as adding meaning and purpose.
- Be a calming influence. If friends or loved ones are overwhelmed, help them gain some perspective on the situation.

## During your shifts

- Monitor yourself for excessive fatigue, irritability, poor focus, or anxiety and pace yourself.
- Take a moment and a slow breath before entering a work area, entering a patient room, or clocking out. This can be difficult if you are wearing PPE but breathing is calming and helps your body cope with physical symptoms of stress.
- Debrief with colleagues after complex or emotional cases.
- Support your colleagues in the form of acknowledgement, direct personal conversation, validation, normalisation, education, empowerment and kindness. Lean on each other. You will be there when your co-workers need help, so count on them to be there for you.
- Help compartmentalise work from the rest of life – identify ways to leave the job behind.
- Acknowledge your grief and anxiety and recognise that they are normal reactions to stress and the experience of loss. Do not hesitate to seek support from a professional counsellor or access your Employee Assistance program if you need to.

Self-care re-ignites our fire and passion. It nourishes us, fuels us and restores us. You need to find the types of self-care that make your juices flow and make you feel like you again. Whatever makes you happy, do more and more of that and remember, nothing lasts forever, no matter how bad it is or feels at the time. Human beings often grow and flourish through adversity, we can take this opportunity to rediscover our shared humanity. We will get through this together.

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