



# Managing your mental health during the COVID-19 crisis

## A guide for staff working on the frontline in Barnsley

If you are a member of staff who is working on the frontline with patients who have (or are suspected of having) COVID-19, whether in a hospital, a care home or the community, it is likely that you are facing high levels of stress. This may have an impact on your emotional and psychological wellbeing.

This document will offer guidance for staff working on the frontline in Barnsley on how to manage the psychological consequences of working under this stress. It describes the likely psychological responses that may be experienced at this time; advises how to help protect your mental wellbeing and the wellbeing of your colleagues as well as pointing to some resources that are available to help you with this; and also explains what to look out for in yourself and your colleagues that might indicate further help is needed, and what options there are for seeking this support.

### Remember...

*These are exceptional circumstances.*  
**It's okay not to be okay.**

With **all of us** in mind.

## Current stressors

**Working on the frontline in the coronavirus crisis, you are likely to be encountering a number of extraordinary challenges. These are:**

- Higher workload, fewer opportunities for breaks, longer hours
- Redeployment into clinical areas that are unfamiliar
- Higher numbers of patient deaths
- Higher levels of distress in patients who may be worrying about their own illness and fear of dying, as well as worrying about their loved ones with social isolation preventing visits
- Working for long periods with PPE
- Worries for yourself and your loved ones, particularly about catching the virus and passing it on
- Potentially having to face difficult choices around allocation of resources which go against your values

*Feel free to include your own below:*

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## Likely reactions

**It is important to note that everybody is different, and so no two people will respond to these stressors in the same way. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel. Below is a list of some of the likely emotional and psychological responses to these pressures:**

- Emotional responses including worry, anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, shame, guilt and numbness
- Feeling as though you are “running on empty”
- Feeling overwhelmed and helpless
- A feeling of readiness and being energised, a feeling of coping well, enjoying the challenge of the work
- Switching between highs and lows
- Poor sleep, bad dreams, difficulty getting up in the morning, perpetual tiredness
- Feelings of dread
- Feeling irritable and uptight – snapping at loved ones

- Poor memory and concentration – struggling to read or watch something on television, finding your mind wanders
- Anxiety symptoms such as palpitations, shaking, difficulty in breathing, choking feelings and dizziness
- Nausea and/or diarrhoea
- Change in sexual interest or ability to perform
- Muscular tension which may lead to pain especially in the neck, back or head
- Increased levels of drinking alcohol or using drugs
- Relationship tensions, increased arguments
- A sense that people around you don't understand
- A lack of closeness in relationships, wanting to be on your own
- A sense of numbness, sleepwalking through your days

As stated above, everyone is different and so you may find that you identify with many or none of the items on this list. A useful exercise can be simply to stop and think about how the pressures that you are under are affecting you, thinking about how you, or others, might perceive you to have been different over the last few weeks and making a mental note of these or writing them down. You may notice fluctuations between times when you feel positive and are coping well, to times when you really find yourself struggling.

*Feel free to note down any of your own responses below:*

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## How to take care of your mental health

Remember that experiencing any number of these responses is normal and not an indication of psychological weakness or mental illness. Nonetheless it is important to be aware of them in both yourself and your colleagues, and to look out for your mental wellbeing in the same way that you would naturally take care of your physical wellbeing. Below is a list of some ways of doing this.

- **Think of talking to others about how you are feeling as being like washing your hands for your mental health:** talk to colleagues, your manager or someone else you trust about how you are feeling
- If you feel it would be helpful to speak to someone you don't know about how you are feeling contact your occupational health service or call the IAPT service

- Check in regularly with your colleagues – get into the habit of offering and taking opportunities to talk
- Don't be afraid to admit you are feeling overwhelmed or struggling, this can be helpful to you and for others to feel not alone
- Be kind to yourself and others
- Give yourself permission to take regular breaks during your shifts
- Do your best to have a good diet, keep hydrated and maintain a regular sleep pattern
- Think about things you have done in the past to help you cope with stressful situations and consider whether you can use any of these again now
- Give yourself some time out between shifts / after work to slow down and bring levels of arousal back to normal
- Exercise regularly
- Plan and engage in activities that you enjoy and that take your mind off the current crisis
- Stay in touch with friends and family – even if you can't see them in person, you can have video and phone calls
- Try not to over-indulge in your use of alcohol, nicotine or other drugs to help you unwind
- Limit the time that you spend watching, reading or listening to the news
- Focus on what is in your control
- Pay attention to things that are going well and share and celebrate successes or small wins
- Remember this is a marathon not a sprint, it will not last forever and will come to an end

*Feel free to note down any of your own ways of coping below:*

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## Remember...

*Talking is like washing your hands for your mental health.*

**It is being responsible, not selfish, to look after yourself.**

## Other sources of support

The University of Nottingham and the University of Leicester have produced an e-learning toolkit which focuses on psychological wellbeing for healthcare workers. This is an excellent resource and covers lots of different topics, from self-care strategies to supporting and signposting others. You can find it here:

[www.nottingham.ac.uk/toolkits/play\\_22794#resume=1](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/toolkits/play_22794#resume=1)

You can access the NHS Every Mind Matters website

[www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/)

and the NHS Our NHS People website [www.people.nhs.uk/](http://www.people.nhs.uk/), both of which are designed to help NHS staff manage their health and wellbeing.

There are a number of online wellbeing resources / apps that are available to frontline staff, many of which are free or have been made free for NHS and other frontline staff. Some of these are listed below:

- Headspace
- Unmind
- Sleepio
- Daylight
- Silvercloud

There are locally provided online sessions:

- Dr Howard Johnson, clinical psychologist with South West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust in Barnsley, is providing live bi-weekly mindfulness sessions over Microsoft Teams. You may have received an email about this, if not contact your occupational health department to get a link
- Dharmachari Prasadu, director of psychological services at Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, has uploaded a series of mindfulness sessions to YouTube for staff to access

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsjF04Q5wKc&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsjF04Q5wKc&feature=youtu.be)

*If you come across or find a helpful resource, please share it with your colleagues*

## When to seek further help

It is normal to respond to current stressors in a range of ways. It is equally important that you do not feel alone and don't think that you are expected to struggle without appropriate support. Telephone numbers are provided at the end of this document where you can speak to someone with mental health training about what you are going through. **Please do not wait until you are in crisis to call one of these numbers**, they are intended to enable fast and easy access into whatever level of support will be most helpful for you at the time, whether it is just a half-hour chat to blow off steam or a requirement for a referral for more formal psychological treatment.

**Below is a list of things to look out for in yourself and others that could indicate that some extra support is necessary:**

- A sense of regularly feeling disconnected from your caring relationship with the patient, their family and your colleagues
- Regularly feeling emotional exhaustion – like you have nothing left to give
- Regularly feeling a lack of accomplishment or a sense of being ineffective in what you do
- Repeated nightmares or flashbacks
- Extended period of not being able to relax, have fun or gain enjoyment

### Remember...

**You don't have to be feeling any of the above to justify calling someone.**

## Who to contact

**If you feel that you would like to speak to someone outside of your circle of colleagues, friends and family here is a list of suggestions:**

- The occupational health service within your organisation
- Yorkshire-wide 24 hour mental health helpline: 0800 183 0558
- IAPT (primary care mental health service) – you can call this service for a chat, some advice or to self-refer. Call 01226 644900 or you can also self-refer through their website: [www.barnsleyiapt.co.uk](http://www.barnsleyiapt.co.uk)
- National staff support line: 0300 1317000
- Your GP

### Remember...

**Talking about how you are feeling is like washing your hands for your mental health. Your reactions are normal and you don't have to cope alone.**