

# Health Promotion to Enhance Healthcare Worker Performance During COVID-19

Healthcare workers and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel will likely experience exacerbated stressors during the COVID-19 response. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers and people at the frontline of the response had already been experiencing burnout<sup>1</sup>. Healthcare workers and EMS personnel are now working longer hours, spending time away from their families and loved ones, being asked to fill emergency positions for which they have limited training, and experiencing unusual physical and mental stressors (e.g., having confidence in reusing or extending use of personal protective equipment (PPE) traditionally used as disposable). These cumulative stressors increase risk factors for an array of behavioral health and mental well-being implications, such as burnout and secondary trauma.

Supervisors and administrators play a significant role in the health and safety of their staff, which includes not only physical concerns, but also their behavioral health and mental well-being. It is important to understand the impact supervisors have on workforce well-being, especially in the current healthcare setting. Workers may experience a spectrum of reactions and it is imperative that employers keep the promotion of health, including mental well-being, of their workers who are at the forefront of company operations during the COVID-19 response.

Leaders have the ability to build resilience in their workers by addressing mental well-being. Resilience leads to better stress management, improves job satisfaction, and increases productivity<sup>2</sup>. Poor behavioral health and stress can have a significant negative impact in workplace efficiency, productivity and overall morale. Further, behavioral health, when addressed in the workplace, can ultimately have a positive financial impact on healthcare facilities<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of this document is to provide information on policies and best practices to use in the workplace to promote the health of the workforce, and subsequently enhance and improve worker performance.

## Workforce Stressors

Normal occupational stress during non-COVID-19 operations include stressors such as job demands, conflict between work and family roles, and financial and economic factors<sup>4</sup>. Unique circumstances of

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<sup>1</sup> Burnout in United States Healthcare Professionals: A Narrative Review. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6367114/>

<sup>2</sup> American Psychiatric Association. Resilience: A Strong Workforce Needs It. <http://workplacementalhealth.org/Mental-Health-Topics/Resilience>

<sup>3</sup>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Mental Health in the Workplace. (2019, April 10). <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/workplace-health/mental-health/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Exposure to Stress, Occupational Hazards in Hospitals. (July 2008). <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2008-136/pdfs/2008-136.pdf>

COVID-19 may change and even intensify stressors for healthcare workers and EMS personnel. These stressors may include: \*<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>

- PPE-related stressors
- Fears of contracting COVID-19
- Fear of subsequently infecting family members
- Loss of autonomy
- Changes in roles/responsibilities
- Additional childcare responsibilities
- Loss of family income
- Working “around the clock”
- Isolation from family and friends
- Information overload
- Secondary trauma (trauma transference)

*\*This is not a comprehensive list; see below for ways leadership can encourage workers to report workforce stressors to meet the comfort levels of employees \**

## Support your Workers

First, recognize changes that have taken place within the workforce. Based on expert consensus through the National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) and feedback through stakeholders, staff roles, decision-making and autonomy have adapted to meet emerging needs. While these changes may benefit overall efficiency, they can also create a sense of powerlessness among staff. In implementing strategies to meet the behavioral health and well-being of healthcare workers and EMS, it is crucial to remember the role of changing autonomy and the power of leadership communication in explaining those changes.

Support and encouragement from leadership should also not be overlooked during this pandemic response. With healthcare workers and EMS personnel undergoing cumulative stressors and changes to their professional autonomy, leadership plays an essential role in supporting staff. By integrating more encouragement, leadership can improve workforce resiliency and comradery during these difficult times. Leadership can support workers by:

- ❖ Celebrating your workers regularly.  
This can be through short videos

### Identify & Recognize Strengths

Highlight strengths within the facility and staff through positive engagement and messaging. This can include:

- Highlight past successes (e.g., dealing with a measles outbreak, natural disaster crisis)
- Identify leaders to model healthy behaviors for others
- Create consistent positive messaging to outweigh the negative
- Thank staff openly and frequently
- Make yourself seen in the hallways, using the same PPE that staff are required to use
- Recognize all successes, no matter how small

<sup>5</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Coping with Stress for Workers.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/mental-health-non-healthcare.html>

<sup>6</sup> National Center for PTSD. Managing Healthcare Workers’ Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak.

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/covid/COVID19ManagingStressHCW032020.pdf>

applauding work from different professions, daily emails, or verbally during scheduled meetings with staff.

- ❖ Walking around and talking with staff. Be careful to make sure you are *not* getting in the way.
- ❖ Creating a safe space for communicating with staff (e.g., weekly meetings) to hear their needs, concerns and personal successes, including the use of confidential surveys or comment boxes.
- ❖ Assisting staff in developing a self-care strategy, see below.

## Encouragement of Workforce Self-Care

As leaders in the healthcare workforce, it is important to encourage and support the self-care of workers. Self-care during this time can be challenging and existing self-care mechanisms may not be enough to meet additional stressors. Healthcare workers may prioritize others needs over their own, making the adoption of a self-care strategy complex. As recommended by the Veterans Affairs (VA) [National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#) (PTSD): *“A self-care strategy should be multi-faceted and phased properly to support the sense of control and contribution of health care providers without making them feel unrealistically responsible for the lives of patients.”*

As noted by Veterans Affairs, below are some ways to help encourage staff to engage in self-care:

- Self-monitoring
  - The National Center for PTSD encourages people to download [COVID Coach](#), a mobile application to support self-care and overall mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Check-ins with colleagues, family, and friends
  - Using the Buddy System is a good way to ensure there are regular, daily check-ins with colleagues. Buddies are responsible for looking out for each other in two main areas: personal safety and resilience. The CDC offers guidance on creating [buddy systems](#).
  - Provide materials on various interactive platforms for staying connected with family, loved ones, and friends. Ex. Facebook, Zoom, Twitter, FaceTime, etc.
- Brief relaxation and stress management breaks
- Decorate the break rooms to be more relaxing using indoor plants and artwork
- Take walking breaks outside to get fresh air
- Time-outs for basic bodily care and refreshment.
- Ensuring workers have access to basic needs such as water, food, and sleep
- Regular peer consultation and supervision

Concurrently, workers should avoid:

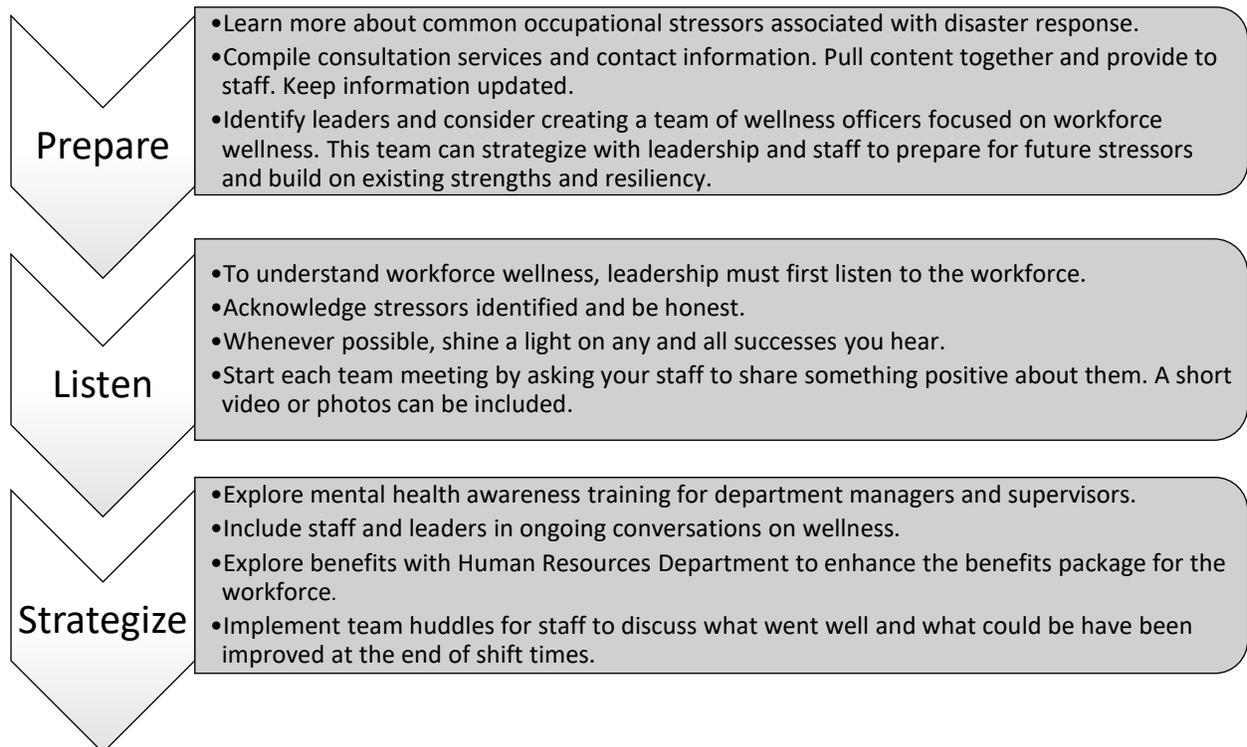
- Working too long by themselves without checking in with colleagues
- Working “around the clock” with few breaks
- Excessive intake of sweets and caffeine
- Engaging in self-talk and attitudinal obstacles to self-care such as:
  - “It would be selfish to take time to rest.”
  - “Others are working around the clock, so should I.”
  - “The needs of survivors are more important than the needs of helpers.”
  - “I can contribute the most by working all the time.”

Further, ensure staff have access to professional assistance should it be needed by:

- Sending out information about how to access external professional resources such as [SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline](#), [SAMHSA's National Helpline](#), or the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)\*
- Ensuring that staff know how to receive services through the company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Ensuring staff know how to search for and connect with a healthcare provider within the company-provided private health insurance

## Organizational Guidelines and Leadership Policies & Protocols

There is no "one size fits all" when developing policies and protocols geared towards building resiliency and mental well-being. Workforce well-being is a process that builds and evolves. Below are methods that leadership can adopt to improve workforce well-being.<sup>7</sup> Use this to brainstorm strategies with workforce personnel to create a well-being strategy that fits expressed needs and unique circumstances.



## Accessing Behavioral Health Services

Information on behavioral health services available through the agency and externally can be condensed to a simple document, which can be conveyed via email, verbally in meetings, and visibly on bulletins or handouts provided to employees. General tips include:

<sup>7</sup> New nurses burnout and workplace wellbeing: The influence of authentic leadership and psychological capital. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2213058614000059>\*

- Explain symptoms that may warrant exploration of professional behavioral health services. Examples are available at [Mental Health America](#)\*.
- Clearly define the process of accessing behavioral health services provided through the workplace (such as through EAP or employer provided insurance).
- Some practitioners may be wary of behavioral health services interfering with board licensing and their ability to practice. Identify state and board regulations for behavioral health services and prescribed medication and cover those concerns briefly in the document.
- Provide external behavioral health options, including providers and available hotlines ([Disaster Distress Hotline](#), SAMHSA's [Find Treatment Website](#), [Suicide Prevention Hotline](#), and state/profession specific hotlines).

## Learning Tools to Support Workforce Mental Well-Being

- Guidance for Managers on [Psychosocial Support and Mental Wellbeing](#)\* of Ambulance Personnel in a Pandemic Crisis
- Mental Health Awareness Training such as [Mental Health First Aid Training](#)\*, a training for anyone who wants to learn about mental illnesses and addictions, including risk factors and warning signs
- Sign-up for [email updates from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA) to receive information and ways to access trainings on matters related to healthcare worker well-being
- Develop an organization-wide program, like the [Stress, Trauma, and Resilience \(STAR\) Brief Emotional Support Team \(BEST\)](#)\*. This type of program provides evidence-based support and training for professionals exposed to trauma. The program trains groups by providing the tools to be able to develop peer-support in the workplace

## Additional Resources

- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress [Sustaining the Well-Being of Healthcare Personnel During Coronavirus and Other Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)\*
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [Emergency Responders: Tips for Taking Care of Yourself](#)
- [Preventing a Parallel Pandemic—A National Strategy to Protect Clinicians' Well-Being](#)\*
- [Mental Health America](#)\*

## Definition of Terms

**Burnout:** physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion and considered in relation to perceived intensity of job-related events and professional depression

**Secondary Trauma:** stress reactions and symptoms resulting from exposure to another individual's traumatic experiences, rather than from exposure directly to a traumatic event

**Resilience:** the sustained ability of communities to withstand and recover—in both the short and long terms—from adversity

[Post Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#): a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault. It's normal to have upsetting memories, feel on edge, or have trouble sleeping after this type of event. If symptoms last more than a few months, it may be PTSD.

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