



A Union of Professionals

# COVID-19 Resources for Healthcare Workers

## STRESS

MARCH 23, 2020

As healthcare workers, you are on the frontline of our nation's COVID-19 response. And you will be asked to devote extraordinary time and effort to care for your patients and the community.

Evidence from past outbreaks alerts us that healthcare workers are at increased risk of stress and stress-related disorders. The AFT urges you not to ignore any signs and symptoms of stress in your dedication to duty. Share your experiences with colleagues and your union leadership. It's essential.

We know these are trying times. We also know that there will be a psychological impact on our healthcare members as a result. Here's what we know from the 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak:

1. Healthcare workers who cared for SARS patients suffered more anxiety, exhaustion and post-traumatic stress symptoms than their colleagues who were at low risk of SARS exposure.
2. Sources of the stress for high-risk workers included being quarantined and losing control over their work.
3. Affected workers often felt stigmatized and considered resigning.

Feeling unsafe and vulnerable to infection were major predictors of increased poor mental health.

### **PAY ATTENTION** to Your Body, Feelings and Spirit:

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress and anxiety.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of thinking and feeling about this event, and think of how you handled your thoughts, emotions and behavior during past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty or angry is common after an event like an infectious disease outbreak, even when it does not directly threaten you.
- Connect with others who may be experiencing stress, anxiety and exhaustion about this pandemic. Talk about your feelings, share reliable health information, and enjoy conversation unrelated to the pandemic to remind yourselves of the many important and positive things in your lives.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer or helping others in need.

Understanding your stress and anxiety response and addressing ways to care for your emotional well-being during this crisis are essential to managing your overall health.

Find these resources and more at [www.aft.org/coronavirus](http://www.aft.org/coronavirus)

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.7 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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## BE PREPARED

### Routinely Monitor Any Signs of Stress and Anxiety

#### BE ALERT TO SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN:

##### YOUR BEHAVIOR:

- An increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- An increase in your alcohol, tobacco use, or use of illegal drugs
- An increase in irritability, with outbursts of anger and frequent arguing
- Having trouble relaxing or sleeping
- Crying frequently
- Worrying excessively
- Wanting to be alone most of the time
- Blaming other people for everything
- Having difficulty communicating or listening
- Having difficulty giving or accepting help
- Inability to feel pleasure or have fun

##### YOUR BODY:

- Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- Having headaches and other pains
- Losing your appetite or eating too much
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors or muscle twitches
- Being easily startled

##### YOUR EMOTIONS:

- Being anxious or fearful
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling angry
- Feeling heroic, euphoric or invulnerable
- Not caring about anything
- Feeling overwhelmed by sadness

##### YOUR THINKING:

- Having trouble remembering things
- Feeling confused
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Having difficulty making decisions

## BE PREPARED

### Things that May Help

Take measure of organizational change—short staffing, excessive overtime and reduced access to essential personal protective equipment. Alert the union if these situations exist.

If you are quarantined or furloughed, have your union assist in negotiating the terms.

The following practices might help to alleviate some of these stress responses.

#### TOP STRATEGIES THAT ARE KNOWN TO WORK:

- Avoid comfort coping, which are Individual actions to distract from distress and numb the emotional response—such as alcohol and drug use, sleeping outside of a typical routine, shopping sprees, comfort food binges and emotional repression. In the long term, these can worsen your mental and physical well-being.
- Eat healthy foods, and drink lots of water.
- Get enough sleep and rest and respite, especially during work or between shifts.
- Get physical exercise—walk your dog, play tag with your kids, go for a bike ride—whatever gets you moving.

#### USE PRACTICAL WAYS TO RELAX:

- Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities; if possible, incorporate mini-breaks at work even if it's just sharing a smile or coffee with a colleague.
- Use time off to relax when you're between shifts—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family.
- Talk frequently about your feelings to loved ones and friends.

#### GET SOCIAL SUPPORT:

- Stay in contact with family and friends. Unfortunately, some workers may find that their family or community members are avoiding them due to stigma or fear. This can make an already challenging situation far more difficult.
- If possible, staying connected with your loved ones; using digital methods is one way to maintain contact.
- Turn to your colleagues, your manager or other trusted people for social support—your colleagues may be having experiences that are similar to your own.

This is a unique and unprecedented scenario for healthcare workers, particularly those who have not been involved in similar responses. Even so, using the strategies that you have used in the past to manage times of stress and anxiety can benefit you now.

## Don't underestimate your resiliency.

- Although dealing with a pandemic is not an experience many of us have had, there have been times we have lived through a crisis and survived. Remember that you usually have more strength and coping skills than you imagine, particularly when you are stressed.

## Practice gratitude.

- Focus on what is going well. We are all in this together, even if some may be better equipped to handle challenging medical and mental health concerns.

## Seek professional help if you need it.

- This is a very difficult time for many of us but particularly for individuals who have pre-existing anxiety and/or related disorders. Do not hesitate to reach out for help from a doctor or mental health professional. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration's National Helpline—**800-662-HELP (4357)** is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service **(in English and Spanish)** for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.