Coronavirus (COVID-19) Practitioner Self-Care Tips

A gentle reminder: Take the time to check in with yourself

The coronavirus pandemic is a disaster on a global scale. In Australia, it has followed rapidly from a devastating bushfire season and drought. Health practitioners supporting people impacted by these disasters may start to feel the cumulative effects of burnout over time. An added stressor is the cessation of face-to-face services to patients and the need to adapt to a 'virtual' world. This will bring new challenges, for both practitioner and patient.

There is currently a great deal of uncertainty about the nature of the coronavirus, its spread, and its scope and impact. This may lead to significant and understandable emotional distress such as apprehension, fear, anger or agitation, not just in your patients, but also for you. As a health practitioner, you have likely been supporting your patients through this, whilst also navigating these uncertainties and changes yourself.

To take care of others, as a health practitioner you must be aware of your own level of stress and take good care of yourself. It is critical to take the time to check in with yourself and develop your own self-care plan. By observing simple self-care strategies you can maintain your mental health and wellbeing during these stressful and unpredictable times.

Practise what you preach!

Here is a reminder of some effective ways to manage your stress and the current demands.

- Recognise that the work you are doing is stressful, and that you may have a physical and emotional reaction to it. Give yourself permission to have a reaction, and also remember your strengths.
- Look after yourself by getting plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep) and regular exercise, and by eating regular, well balanced meals.
- Minimise your intake of alcohol, caffeine or nicotine and avoid the use of non-prescription drugs. Use all prescription and over-the-counter medications as indicated.
- Make time for relaxation – whether it's listening to music, taking a bath, meditation, yoga, or breathing exercises.
- Try making a timetable for each day, including some exercise, enjoyable activities and relaxation.
- Spend time with people you care about - even if it can only be 'virtually'. Sometimes you will want to be alone, but try not to become too isolated.
- Journal your feelings.
- Seek professional supervision or peer support.
- Maintain strong boundaries at work. Recognise your limits – we all have them. Remind yourself that staying within your limits supports your wellbeing and makes you feel more effective at work.

If you've tried these strategies and things still aren't improving after a couple of weeks, or if you are having trouble coping, talk to your GP or mental health professional.

Particular considerations during isolation and working from home

- Take time to support your own transition to spending more time at home and any other changes such as home schooling your children.
- Be prepared (e.g., develop a personal/family preparedness plan in case you are quarantined or need to self-isolate).
- Stay informed - access reliable information to ensure you and your family are taking appropriate steps to stay healthy.
- Limit media exposure. Today's 24-hour news cycle can make it difficult to turn away from the TV, radio, or news feed. Research has shown that excess media exposure to coverage of stressful events can result in negative mental health outcomes. Use trusted media outlets to gather the information you need, then turn them off.
- Take advantage of the extra time to do things that you've been wanting to do, like reading a book or learning a new skill.
- Go outside at least once a day.
- Remember to modify your self-care plan as needed, and as we progress through the pandemic management phases.

If you are working from home:

- Establish a specific place in your home for work. Avoid working in your bedroom if possible.
- Set up a routine and structure for your work day and create strong boundaries between work and home time. This will help you to switch off from work at the end of the day, and move into your personal time.
  - o Structure your day as though you are going into the office, with a clear start and finish time, as well as regular breaks.
  - o Try walking to and from 'work' by scheduling exercise time at the start and end of your work day.
  - o Get dressed for work at the start of the day, and change out of your work clothes at the end of work.
- Stay connected with your colleagues by scheduling regular virtual meetings.
- In place of informal conversations, schedule regular virtual 'coffee breaks' to stay connected to your peers.
- Continue with supervision, mentoring and/or coaching.
- Remind yourself of the positives of working from home such as increased flexibility and avoiding long commutes.
- If you are new to telehealth or could benefit from a refresher, contact your professional organisation, most are offering training. Alternatively, online training such as that offered by the Australian Psychological Society (APS), is available to support you in adjusting your practice and delivering online treatment.

Be honest with yourself and recognise the need to access professional support if you are experiencing disturbed sleep, withdrawal from family/ friends, and/or increased use of substances. Making the decision to access professional assistance yourself is a wise choice that can help you to regain emotional strength and resilience.