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Grief Following Patient Deaths During COVID-19

Tips for Healthcare Workers in Managing Grief

Patient death under normal circumstances can result in grief, stress, and anxiety. During the COVID-19 crisis, healthcare workers are experiencing greater than normal patient loss together with an increase in patients and limited resources to meet needs. Grief for patient deaths can be amplified in a stressful environment. This cumulative grief can negatively affect the health of healthcare workers and patient care.

Listed below are tips and general guidance to mitigate the impacts of grief and to maintain workforce efficiency and individual well-being.

What Makes Cumulative Grief Different?

Under normal circumstances, healthcare workers have more time to grieve and manage stress following the death of a patient. With increased deaths, the behavioral health impact of grief and the risk of burnout increase. This can result in compassion fatigue, low morale, exhaustion, burnout, and errors that could harm patient care.

Symptoms of Grief and Stress

The first step to managing grief is recognizing the symptoms, which are often very similar to stress. There is no one size fits all and symptoms of grief and stress related to grief will vary from person-to-person.

Symptoms May Include:

- Numbness/disbelief
- Lack of concentration
- Memory lapses
- Impaired decision-making
- Increased alcohol or other substance use
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Irritability/anger
- Anxiety
- Social isolation
- Sadness
- Inability to feel pleasure
- Changes in eating habits
- Depression
- Headaches
- Work performance issues
- Guilt or shame
- Preoccupation with circumstances of death

Focus on What You Can Control

Healthcare workers cannot control many aspects of this pandemic. Managing what is within your control is one way to address grief and stress.

- Identify what you can and cannot control. Focus efforts on what is within your control.
- Grief is a normal response to the situation. Acknowledge grief as it happens.
- Schedule time to grieve, no matter how short.
- Whenever possible, create breaks by alternating stressful tasks with less stressful ones.
- To manage thoughts, write them down.
- Find ways of expressing gratitude, kindness, and patience.

Prioritize Basic Needs and Physical Health

Ensuring that basic needs are met is critical for managing grief.

- Sleep
 - Lack of sleep and sleep interruptions contributes to stress and mistakes.
 - When possible, work to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Aim for eight hours cumulative time in bed over 24 hours, preferably during nighttime hours if not doing shift work.

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- Avoid staying in bed if awake for more than 20 minutes. Instead, get out of bed and do something non-stimulating (e.g., read a book) until you feel sleepy again. Get back in bed when sleepy.
- Communicate with leadership if shifts or rotations need changing to allow for sleep.
- Physical Activity
 - Take time to engage in moderate intensity (e.g., brisk walk) activity for 30 minutes/day.
 - The 30 minutes can be broken into smaller blocks of time (e.g., three 10-minute blocks).
- Nutrition
 - If you are forgetting to eat regularly, set alarms for food breaks.
 - If possible, keep snacks with you and take short breaks from work while eating. Even if it's only for five minutes, take a break for snacks.
- Hygiene
 - Schedule time to attend to hygiene (e.g., brushing teeth, washing).
 - If your workplace has a shower available, keep a towel and needed toiletries on-hand.

Coping and Self-Care

- You are not alone in this crisis and in grief. Lean on colleagues, family, and friends for support.
 - Chances are the people you lean on for support are also benefiting from the interaction.
 - If your schedule is chaotic, schedule specific support time.
- If feasible, consider establishing an informal memorial to remember lost patients.
- Coping mechanisms that you have used in the past may not be enough to manage cumulative grief. Explore new methods and reach out to colleagues for advice and to share ideas for coping.

Behavioral Health Care

- Identify someone you would feel comfortable asking for guidance and reach out for behavioral health services.
- Anonymous helplines are available for crisis support or before deciding to participate in clinical mental health services. To reach a trained crisis counselor through the Disaster Distress Hotline, please call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.
- Seek professional help when needed. See if your employer provides an Employee Assistance Program.

Additional Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [Tips for taking care of yourself](#).
- Association of American Medical Colleges article [Compassion Fatigue: The toll of being a care provider](#).¹
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Health Resources and Services Administration presentation on [Compassion Fatigue and Self-Care](#).
- [SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response App](#).
- Uniformed Services University Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress [COVID-19 Pandemic Response Resources](#)
- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [Managing Healthcare Workers' Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak](#).

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