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# Managing Patient and Family Distress Associated with COVID-19

## Tips for Healthcare Workers in Hospitals and Alternate Care Settings

Receiving healthcare in a hospital or alternate care setting can cause stress and anxiety under normal conditions. During an emerging infectious disease outbreak, such as COVID-19, the number of individuals experiencing distress—and the intensity of that stress and anxiety—may be significantly amplified. This stress and anxiety can contribute to unexpected patient behaviors, result in reluctance to follow medical advice, and ultimately contribute to mortality and morbidity.

The expected surge of healthcare utilization brought on by an infectious disease outbreak may make it necessary for healthcare facilities to modify their usual care practices. These modifications may be in direct contrast with the expectations patients and families have about their care and therefore make their experience even more distressing. Listed below are steps that hospital and alternate care setting staff can take to help patients and their families manage this distress more effectively. Providers are encouraged to adapt recommended actions based on their facility's individual needs and practical considerations (e.g. limited resources and staff).

### **Communication: Take time to hear patient concerns and worries**

Patients may be scared for themselves or others, may feel guilty or stigmatized, or may be worried about practical issues (e.g., who will take care of dependents or pets, how will bills get paid, will they lose their job).

- When talking with patients, come to eye level with them and talk calmly and clearly.
- Acknowledge the challenges to effective communication presented by PPE (masks, face shields, and other barriers that limit non-verbal expression).
- Reassure patients that you want to minimize any discomfort or concerns they may have about the care they are receiving.
- Take time to ask about and listen to patients' most significant concerns.
- Although there may not be clear answers or solutions, display openness and honesty.
- Have difficult conversations with patients as needed (e.g. such as encouraging patients to create living wills/advance directives).
- Reflect back what you have heard the patient say and identify the emotion the patient is communicating.
  - Patient: "I need to see my family."
  - Provider: "It's normal to feel scared in this situation and it's important for you to connect with your family. Let's figure out how we can get you connected with them."
- [VitalTalk](#) provides practical advice about how to have difficult conversations. The site provides tips and scripts specific to [COVID-19](#) and these resources are also all available on an [app](#).<sup>1</sup>
- Schedule time to talk with or send regular emails to family/caregivers to provide frequent care updates.

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## **Social Support: Help patients stay connected with their social support system**

While in-person visits may not be possible, consider ways that patients can stay in contact with their social support system (e.g., family, friends, spiritual support).

- Consider strategies to promote social support for these populations:
  - *Has own device (e.g. Smartphone, tablet). Communicates independently.*
    - Provide access to charging (e.g., cables, power strips).
    - Ensure ability to connect to the internet through Wi-Fi or other means.
    - Identify staff who can help patients set up FaceTime or video calls or use group communication applications (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.).
  - *Does NOT have own device. Communicates independently.*
    - Provide regular access to devices to allow for communication.
    - Have plan for sanitizing shared devices.
  - *May or may not have own device. Has difficulty or can NOT communicate independently.*
    - Provide device as needed and assist with device use.
    - Have plan for sanitizing shared devices.
    - Establish daily schedule to communicate with family, friends, or other supports.
    - Assign personnel to facilitate this communication.
    - Even if the patient is too ill to engage it is important for loved ones to be able to see them. Train staff on things to say to reassure those at home about the care their loved one and allow for visual contact with patient through video calls or communication applications.
- Develop a group setting where patients can talk with each other (as social distancing/infection control procedures allow).
- Connect patients with behavioral health providers, social workers, and/or spiritual support.
  - Establish telehealth protocols and capabilities for these essential services.
  - If none are immediately available consider connecting patients with the Disaster Distress Helpline (Call [1-800-985-5990](tel:1-800-985-5990) or text TalkWithUs to 66746) to connect with a trained crisis counselor.

## **Engage patients in activities**

Giving patients access to devices, materials, or projects allows them to focus on something other than their own thoughts and worries. Some ideas include:

- Provide devices to listen to music, watch movies or TV, play video games, read books, play video, or listen to audiobooks and podcasts.
- Provide books, magazines, puzzles, games, coloring books with crayons, other art supplies, or yarn for knitting or crocheting.
- Offer opportunities to engage in volunteer projects (e.g., writing to deployed service members or to other patients in the hospital or in other facilities).
- Provide journals or pen and paper for patients to write their thoughts, letters, to do lists, etc.

## **Promote sleep, relaxation, and mindfulness**

Patients may not be able to use the coping mechanisms that they typically rely on to manage stress.

Teaching and encouraging the use of simple relaxation techniques helps patients decrease their physiological arousal levels and focus on something besides their illness.

- Maximize opportunities for effective sleep. Unnecessary sleep interruptions contribute to distress.
- Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery can help patients focus on decreasing the intensity of their distress.

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- Encourage the use of smartphone apps designed to facilitate mindfulness and relaxation.

### **Resources for Patients**

- [CDC Manage Anxiety and Stress](#)
- [CDC Talking with children about COVID-19](#)
- [NCTSN Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019<sup>2</sup>](#)
- [Mindfulness Coach](#) and [Breath2Relax](#) apps.<sup>3</sup>

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