

# MANAGING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF HEALTH WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## PAHO



Pan American Health Organization



World Health Organization  
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE AMERICAS



## EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO INTENSE AND PROLONGED STRESS

Feeling under pressure is a likely experience for you and many of your colleagues. Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak.

Managing your mental health and psychosocial well-being during this time is as important as managing your physical health.

This is not a sprint. It is a marathon that requires ongoing self-care.

## SELF-CARE RECOMMENDATIONS



### 1. TAKE CARE OF BASIC NEEDS

- Be sure to eat a healthy and balanced diet at regular times.
- Stay hydrated. Drink water continuously.
- Avoid sugary beverages and junk food.
- Sleep at least 8 hours to recover from the work day.

*Not doing these things puts your mental and physical health at risk and impairs your ability to care for patients.*

### 2. REST

- Whenever possible, engage in activities that bring you comfort and are fun and relaxing, such as playing with your children, reading, watching movies, playing board games, and talking about everyday issues besides the pandemic.
- When you're working, take active breaks as often as possible.
- Don't use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

*Understand that getting enough rest will result in better care for patients.*

### 3. STAY CONNECTED WITH CO-WORKERS AND COLLEAGUES

- Observe and listen. Respect personal differences. Some people prefer not to talk much, while others feel better and are happier sharing their experiences.
- Have constructive conversations. Identify mistakes and failures without judging people. We all complement each other: praise is a powerful motivator that reduces stress.
- Form a self-help group to discuss concerns and anxieties that meets at least once a week in a safe and impartial space.
- If you see that a colleague is at risk of suffering a mental health problem due to chronic stress, immediately notify your team leader.

*The ability to solve problems is a professional skill that creates a great feeling of accomplishment, even for the little things.*



### 4. STAY CONNECTED WITH LOVED ONES

- Whenever you feel overwhelmed, if possible call your loved ones or contact them virtually.

*Your family and loved ones are your support outside of the health system.*

### 5. SELF-OBSERVATION OF EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS



- Notice and track your emotions and reactions over time.
- If you continue to feel exhausted, can't sleep, have no appetite, or experience prolonged sadness, intrusive thoughts, or desperation, ask a colleague or supervisor for help.

*It is normal to have uncomfortable feelings at times; they are there to protect you from danger. Recognize any signs of stress, and pause to address them. Self-care is your responsibility.*

### 6. LIMIT EXPOSURE TO MEDIA



- Use psychological protection mechanisms to limit how often you use media such as WhatsApp to check on private or work-related issues, preventing you from resting.

*Disturbing images and messages increase stress and may reduce your effectiveness and overall well-being.*

### 7. FORM MUTUAL SUPPORT AND/OR SELF-HELP GROUPS



- A self-help group is voluntarily set up by colleagues to air emotions such as confusion, anxiety, lack of control, fear, blame, sadness, indifference, and irritability that are causing stress. Group activities take place in a trusting and confidential environment for people who are in similar circumstances.

**When setting up a self-help group, please remember:**

The group is voluntary – schedule a regular meeting time with clear beginning and ending times – rotate the group leader role – these groups are confidential and meetings are held in a private space – se lleva a cabo en un espacio privado – if the group sees that a member is at risk of suffering a mental health problem, make sure this is addressed!

*Sharing feelings with people who instill a sense of safety and trust helps us regulate our emotions.*

**IT'S OK TO ASK FOR HELP!!!**