

WELLBEING AND STRESS MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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On February 21, 2020 Lebanon reported its first case of COVID-19.¹ The World Health Organization² declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11.² As the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic evolved, Healthcare Workers (HCW) started facing challenges they had never encountered before, in their professional and personal lives.³

Challenges

The pandemic toppled HCW's sense of control. Worldwide, shortages in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were reported.⁴ Infections and deaths from COVID-19 among HCW occurred across the globe.^{5,6,7} Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in late December 2019, through February 25, 2020 in China, 3,387 HCWs were infected in Hubei province of which 18 died.⁵ In the United States of America, 9,282 HCWs with COVID-19 were reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention⁶ as of April 9, 2020, of which 27 died.⁷ Lack of access to appropriate PPE, being exposed to COVID-19 at work and the possibility to carry the infection home to family members were reported as sources of anxiety by HCW.⁸ Moreover, clinicians were practicing in unfamiliar environments (whereby non-critical care nurses were being asked to cover intensive care units) which posed an additional challenge. In addition HCWs were dealing with quarantines, social isolation, and schools and daycares closure.^{8,9} Unfavorable mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, insomnia, and distress) affected at a higher rate HCWs with direct exposure to COVID-19, women, and nurses.⁹

The chaos of the outbreak underscored the challenges that healthcare workers faced in prioritizing their wellness in the face of limited resources, often brutal hours, and seemingly endless demands on their bandwidth.¹⁰

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Current practices and measures at the American University of Beirut Medical Center (AUBMC) related to the COVID-19 pandemic

Understanding the severity of COVID-19 transmission to HCWs, the Occupational Medicine staff working in the Employee Health Unit at AUBMC collaborated with the Infection Control and Prevention staff to make sure HCWs across the medical center were adequately trained on proper use of PPEs. A ‘train the trainer’ model was implemented and allowed training of the largest number of HCWs. Trainers ensured that staff mastered donning and doffing of PPE, as per the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).^{11,12} In addition, rigorous reviews of all potential exposures were undertaken, following best practice guidelines for assessment and management of exposed staff.¹³⁻¹⁵

Multiple initiatives were also launched in collaboration with the Psychiatry Department. Individual as well as group support sessions, were made available to all HCWs at no charge. Because of concerns with physical distancing imposed by the pandemic, sessions were made available online.

The Health and Wellness Center at the Department of Family Medicine at AUBMC launched its COVID-19 Wellness Campaign entitled “During COVID-19, Your Wellness Matters As Well”. This campaign aimed to guide the AUB community members on ways to lead a healthy lifestyle and maintain their wellbeing despite the current situation and to provide them with the required evidence-based wellness resources to prevent burnout and improve their mental health and emotional vitality. The wellness activities of the campaign addressed the essential pillars of lifestyle medicine that promote health and wellbeing: healthy diet, exercise, stress management, tobacco cessation, adequate sleep, and healthy relationships.^{16,17,18} The

material was posted on the center’s website and social media platforms. Weekly email tips and online videos promoting healthy eating were shared with the community. Online aerobic and yoga sessions were conducted. To help HCWs cope better with stress, several evidence-based stress management techniques were adopted (an online stress management webinar, an online mindfulness course open for free to all healthcare workers,¹⁹ series of breathing techniques videos,²⁰ and online meditation classes,²¹ as well as online yoga classes). Tips on the importance of maintaining adequate sleep were communicated to educate HCWs on the crucial role of sleep in fighting infection and supporting metabolism.²² With smokers being at higher risk of getting COVID-19,⁶ and tobacco smoking increasing the risk of getting severe COVID-19 complications,²³ HCWs who smoked were at increased risk of getting severely ill if they got infected with COVID-19. Smokers working in the COVID-19 unit were also at risk of developing intense nicotine cravings and withdrawal symptoms, since they were not allowed to smoke as they were not leaving the unit during their breaks, to prevent virus transmission. Therefore, enrolling these employees in the smoking cessation program at the Health and Wellness Center was a crucial step to help them deal with their cravings and withdrawal symptoms. Moreover, behavioral counseling provided needed support through regular phone calls and messages.

Conclusion

HCWs are at high risk of acquiring COVID-19 through occupational exposure and bear a disproportionate burden of this pandemic as they are more likely to experience unfavorable mental health outcomes. Medical centers should not spare any effort to prepare, protect and support its valuable workforce during this unprecedented time.

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