

# EMOTIONAL SUPPORT RESOURCES

How to Help During COVID-19



## FEAR AND ANXIETY

We are in the midst of a global pandemic, and as a healthcare worker, you are witnessing this on the frontlines. It is **normal** to experience fear and anxiety during this time.

### What happens to our bodies and minds when we experience anxiety?

Feeling fear and anxiety in the face of danger simply means your body and brain are working together to protect you. A threat in the environment is prompting your sympathetic nervous system (the part of your nervous system in charge of the “fight/flight” response) to take all the necessary steps to protect you:

- Your **heart rate increases**
- You are more **“on edge”** and ready to quickly react to new threats
- You have the **urge to withdraw** to safety
- Fear and anxiety in the face of a real threat are not signs of weakness.
- They are **signs of health**

Some anxiety, especially as you complete risky tasks, keeps you alert and safe.

But **too much** can be paralyzing and can affect your concentration and wellness.

### Take Time to Breathe!



There are simple activities you can try that have been shown to activate your parasympathetic nervous system (the part in charge of the “rest” response).

- Try these activities when you feel that fear is not protective, is interfering with tasks at work, or is getting in the way with family and friends.

### Try Paced Breathing

Close your eyes

**Breathe in through your nose**  
for 5 seconds

**Breathe out your mouth**  
for 7 seconds

**Breathe in through your nose**  
for 5 seconds

**Breathe out your mouth**  
for 7 seconds

Repeat 5-6 times per minute  
for 2 minutes or more



### Coping Skills

Both pressure (think massages!) and deep breathing can activate your parasympathetic nervous system and lower your fear and anxiety:

- **Find a place** where you can take a moment to concentrate without being interrupted: a bathroom, a corner, a hallway, anywhere
- **Wrap your arms around yourself** as if you were giving yourself a hug, bringing your hands to your shoulders and giving them a firm squeeze
- While squeezing your shoulders, **try to take a deep breath**. When you release your breath, release your shoulders and move your hands further down your arm
- Squeeze again, **breathe again**. Release, move down your arm
- Continue giving your arms gentle yet firm squeezes starting in the shoulder and leading to your elbows as you breathe

In a crisis?

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## MORAL DISTRESS

As we continue to provide essential healthcare services in this crisis, we are likely to be faced with choices and experiences that transgress our own moral beliefs, values, and ethics. We can name these feelings, reduce how overwhelming they feel, and identify what is in our control.



Moral distress comes up when we are faced with choices that put our values at odds. Some of the morally distressing questions we might be having include:

- Should I choose to follow orders or listen to my instincts?
- Should I choose to take more responsibilities or take care of myself?
- Should I choose to stay at home or go to work?
- Who do I choose to social distance from?
- How can I choose whose needs and lives to prioritize?
- Am I participating in furthering oppression and inequality?
- Should I focus on what is better for me, what is better for my loved ones, what is better for my patients, and/or what is better for my community?

### How Does it Feel?



This distress is experienced through our **thoughts, bodily sensations, and actions.**

#### Body Signs:

Stomach pain/discomfort  
Back or shoulder tension  
Headaches  
Chest tightness  
Trouble sleeping

#### Actions:

Avoiding work  
Avoiding coworkers  
Lashing out  
Acting in ways that don't feel good to you

We may find ways to soothe this distress (like drinking heavily or taking risks) that help in the short-term but may have negative long-term consequences.

### How can I Cope?

- 1. Acknowledge.** Take a moment to note you are experiencing moral distress.
- 2. Regulate.** Distress is held in the body so we need to calm our system! Physically regulate your body through breath and symbolic, repeated motions.
  - Hold your hands together and interlace your fingers
  - Think of one small thing you feel good about that you did today. Visualize it filling your heart
  - Separate your hands and open your palms
  - Think of something you are judging yourself for. Imagine it dissolving into air
  - Repeat this action. Hold and separate your hands 10x
- 3. Connect.** Ask others around you if they are experiencing similar dilemmas. Recognize people make different choices based on different circumstances and risk. Be kind and support each other.
- 4. Be kind to yourself.** Trust that you're making the best decisions that you can with choices that you have. Our circumstances are evolving daily. We are in this together and trying our best to act in line with our values.

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## GRIEF AND LOSS

During this crisis, **we are all grieving**. We are grieving the ways life used to be before this crisis - and we are mourning the loss of friends, family, and patients. Take some time to move through the five stages of grief to help you and your coworkers manage and heal.

### What are Some Reasons People are Grieving?

Loss of contact with patients, family, or friends

Deaths of patients, family, or friends

Loss of experiences, pleasure, and joys of daily life

Loss of normalcy and sense of safety



### What are Signs I May be Grieving?

Anger, irritability, short temper

Withdrawal from social interactions

Rejection/minimization of own feelings

Hyperfocus on helping others

Feeling "too much" or more than normal  
Feeling "nothing" or less than normal



### 5 Stages of Grief and Strategies to Support Yourself and Your Coworkers

- 1. Denial:** "This virus can't impact me! I'm young and healthy."
  - Unhelpful response: "You're right! You're young. Don't worry."
  - Helpful response: "I admire your gusto. We're gonna make sure you have the right protective equipment to minimize that risk. Your health is important to me."
- 2. Anger:** "How dare you force me to work during a pandemic!?"
  - Unhelpful response: "This is what you signed up for."
  - Helpful response: "I know it's difficult to work while also dealing with risk and loss. How can we help manage your understandable frustration? How can I advocate for you?"
- 3. Bargaining:** "If I just get through the next week, everything will be fine."
  - Unhelpful response: "No way this is ending next week."
  - Helpful response: "It makes sense to take it a day at a time, especially when we don't know when this will end. We're here to support you as things evolve and change."
- 4. Sadness:** "The situation is hopeless. I want to quit."
  - Unhelpful response: "Just suck it up and keep going."
  - Helpful response: "It can feel so hopeless sometimes. I'm hopeful because we are working together to help people."
- 5. Acceptance:** "This is happening and it is tough. I have to figure out how I can help."
  - Unhelpful response: "Stop making a big deal out of this."
  - Helpful response: "Yes, this is tough. Let's put our minds together and figure out how to keep both of us connected to our own reactions while we stay engaged in helping others."

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## ANGER

It is natural to feel increased anger in the context of the current pandemic. Anger can be useful. At times, it can become intense and impact us in unhelpful ways. Below are some **tips and skills for managing and healing through anger.**



### Know your Triggers

Triggers are the things that set you off and warning signs alert you that your anger is starting to grow. Knowing your triggers and warning signs will prompt you to use coping skills that reduce the likelihood of acting on your anger in unhelpful ways.

- **Create a list of triggers.** This will help you notice them before they become a problem.
- Make changes to your lifestyle, relationships, or daily routine to **minimize triggers.**
- We can't avoid all triggers, so **make a plan for when you must face them.**
- **Notice warning signs** (e.g. sweating, raised voice, pacing, becoming argumentative, clenched fists) as early as possible, to prevent escalation.



### Use Coping Skills

#### 1. Talk yourself down:

Take a deep breath. Acknowledge that your feelings of anger are valid. Imagine what your calmest friend would advise and give yourself the same advice.

#### 2. Deep breathing:

Try this simple technique to help manage hot and tough emotions. It is effective, discreet, and easy to use at any time or place, even with patients.

Instructions: Sit comfortably and place one hand on your abdomen. Breathe in through your nose, deeply enough that the hand on your abdomen rises. Hold the air in your lungs, and then exhale slowly through your mouth, with your lips puckered as if you are blowing through a straw. The secret is to go slow: Time the inhalation (4s), pause (4s), and exhalation (6s). Practice for 3 to 5 minutes.

#### 3. Distract yourself:

If you can distract yourself or remove yourself from the situation, you'll have a better chance of effectively managing your anger. You can return to the source of your anger later - just set the problem aside for now.

Instructions: Go for a walk, listen to music, do a chore, read, exercise, call a friend.

#### 4. Take a time-out:

Take a time-out during a heated disagreement. When taking a time-out, both individuals agree to walk away from the problem and return once they have had the opportunity to cool down.

Instructions: Clearly communicate that you need a time-out, plan a diversion to do during the time-out that will help you cool down, and plan to return to the disagreement once both parties are ready.

#### 5. Be assertive:

Being assertive is a healthier way to express anger than aggression.

Instructions: Tell people that you are feeling angry and why. Talk slowly and clearly. Use the word "I" to make it about you, not about them. Make specific requests rather than demands or threats.

### Keep an Anger Log

Following anger, take a moment to log what happened:

- What happened **before** you experienced anger? How were you feeling? What were you thinking? Were you hungry, stressed, or tired?
- What events **triggered** your anger? How did you react?
- What were your thoughts and feelings **during** the anger episode?
- How did you feel **after**?



### Worried about the Anger of Others?

Below are links to resources if you believe you or someone you know needs help managing physical reactions to anger:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233; thehotline.org; text LOVEIS to 22522
- Anti-Violence Project for LGBTQ and HIV-positive communities: 212-714-1141; 24/7; bilingual

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