



ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

For Providers and Community Leaders: Helping People Manage Stress Associated with the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak

When the public learns of an outbreak of an infectious disease such as COVID-19, they may experience anxiety and show signs of stress, even if the objective risk of getting sick is very low. Concerns about transmission from person to person may affect accessibility of social supports and reduce community cohesion. Although public health authorities are working to contain the spread of the virus, epidemics are unpredictable in nature. If more cases occur, members of the public may well become increasingly concerned and some may begin to panic.

This stress is normal and may be more pronounced in people with loved ones in parts of the world hardest hit by the outbreak. Healthcare providers, community and religious leaders, and government officials all have a role to play in helping people cope effectively and manage their stress in the current climate of concerns about COVID-19 transmission. They can:

- provide the public with accurate and calming information about COVID-19 risk
- help the public recognize signs of stress in themselves and their loved ones
- teach them how to relieve anxiety reactions, and
- provide them with resources so they can seek further help if necessary

Important Key Principles

There are five key principles for healthcare providers, community leaders, and others concerned with the psychological welfare of the public to follow when providing help in situations like the COVID-19 outbreak. Keep in mind that there is room for significant local variation and innovation in ways of embodying these principles in care efforts. The principles are:

Promote a Sense of Safety. Infectious disease outbreaks can challenge individuals' psychological sense of safety, leaving them worried about infection and, potentially, death. All interventions that help restore a sense of relative safety can help minimize psychological consequences. In the case of COVID-19, fears can be reduced through education about the means of virus transmission, what individuals can do to protect

themselves and their loved ones, and accurate information about the likelihood of severe illness and risk of death related to the illness.

Promote a Sense of Self- and Community-Efficacy. Infectious diseases like COVID-19 can engender feelings of helplessness about preventing infection, managing the course of illness, and protecting one's family. Feelings of helplessness and anger may also arise if people have concerns about the government's perceived transparency and capacity to manage public health (i.e., control the spread of disease). Therefore, it is important that individuals, families, and organizations be empowered to take control of the situation to the extent possible.

Encouraging active coping that aligns with public health guidance and messaging is also important. For example, encouraging people to read COVID-19-related information from trusted sources like the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) website](#) is likely to increase a sense of confidence in their ability to take action. Information about using technology to safely support and share information and resources helps promote community efficacy and a sense of control in responding to the situation.

Promote a Sense of Connectedness. Social support is a crucial resource in dealing with all stressors. In an outbreak---where people are urged to stay away from the sick, avoid large gatherings, and may even face quarantine of themselves or their loved ones---it can be challenging to maintain. Healthcare providers can help facilitate connectedness through the use of technology, including telephone support groups, text messaging and email mutual support forums, facilitated web-based chat rooms and video calling. These methods can be especially important for people separated because of quarantine. Healthcare providers can also help people work through the anger and guilt that they may feel about staying away from loved ones in cases of quarantine.

Promote a Sense of Calming. Both through personal contacts and public messages, healthcare providers and community leaders can help make a stressful time feel less turbulent. Healthcare providers can promote relaxation strategies via apps, brief advice, and training programs. They can also help correct inaccurate negative beliefs about the virus. For their part, public officials should work to reassure the public and stop the spread of rumors.

Promote a Sense of Hope. Public communication efforts can focus on what is being done to address the outbreak, resources that are available to help those affected by the COVID-19 virus, hopeful messages related to positive aspects of the large-scale response and the time-limited nature of the outbreak, and inspirational stories of healing and transcending challenging circumstances.

Fostering Adaptive Functioning in the Public

With these key principles in mind, leaders can take concrete steps to maximize public trust, foster social connections, support community and individual wellbeing, and promote adaptive behavior change.

Healthcare providers should

- Clearly and authoritatively convey risk and resilience messages.
- Use a flexible style of communication that is tailored to the stress level and threat level of each person.

- Be culturally competent and thoughtful of people's views, priorities, and preferences.
- Address deficits in knowledge, trust, materials, and resources as they emerge.
- Contact the [PTSD Consultation Program](#) with questions about managing stress related to COVID-19 via email at PTSDconsult@va.gov or phone: 866-948-7880.

Community leaders should

- Develop and provide materials that include evidence-informed coping tips and self-care facts.
- Direct people to resources---websites, social media, news outlets---that provide authoritative information.
- Engender in the public a sense of safety and control.
- Increase the likelihood that communities and individuals will be able to create their own maps for navigating through the situation by empowering self-efficacy.
- Disseminate information that promotes social connectedness, calming---rather than fear---and feelings of safety and hope.
- Provide guidance about building resilience, including tips for increasing social support, maintaining optimism, setting goals, achieving emotional and social balance, and employing multiple types of problem-solving and coping.
- Incorporate hospice and faith communities in community response plans.
- Identify individuals at risk and facilitate access to appropriate mental health services.

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