



A Self-Care Guidebook for Frontline Workers

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Introduction

We have heard the phrase “these are unprecedented times” a few times during this Covid-19 pandemic. And, as a health care worker or first responder you have been on the front lines of a rapidly changing response to save lives and stay healthy in the process. Health care workers have been exposed to extraordinary amounts of stress which has an effect on your mental health and well-being. At AmeriCares we are concerned about this and have developed resources and tools to help you as you continue your vital work. This guidebook is a companion to our webinar course entitled: You Can’t Give What You Don’t Have: Self-Care Strategies for the Busy Health Professional.

Identifying Symptoms

Vicarious Trauma: the emotional residue of exposure that healthcare workers have from working with people as they are hearing their trauma stories and become witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that survivors have endured.

- **Cognitive Symptoms.** Difficulty in focusing, feeling “foggy” in the brain, difficulty in remembering situations/tasks, difficulty making decisions in daily life, having the inability to separate work from personal life, and most commonly, thinking more negatively/cynically/hopeless than usual.
- **Emotional Symptoms.** Experiencing irritability, anger, easily distracted, feelings of grief, anxiety, sadness, losing sense of humor.
- **Physiological Symptoms.** Significant changes in weight loss (increase or decrease), migraines/headaches, rashes, ulcers, heartburn, heart palpitations, chest pain.
- **Behavioral Symptoms.** Experiencing an increased desire for isolation, adverse change in eating habits, adverse change in sleep patterns, increase in alcohol or substance consumption.
- **Spiritual Symptoms.** Losing sense of hope, feeling disconnected with themselves and their environment; a decreased sense of purpose, and losing sight of their life purpose/existential beliefs

Burnout: a long-term stress reaction marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of sense of personal accomplishment.

- **Cognitive Symptoms.** Thinking cynically/negatively, “checking out” in professional and personal life, developing intrusive thoughts towards self and possibly others.
- **Emotional Symptoms.** Feeling angry with the environment and population being served, feeling hopeless and having a “short fuse” with everyone/everything.
- **Physiological Symptoms.** Constantly feeling fatigued, adverse change in daily physical routine (i.e. increasingly feeling lethargic and stopping usual hobbies), feeling perpetually exhausted.
- **Behavioral Symptoms.** Essentially numbing out the external environment, creating self to become unresponsive or showing indifference, withdrawing from daily routine/lifestyle, personally and professionally.

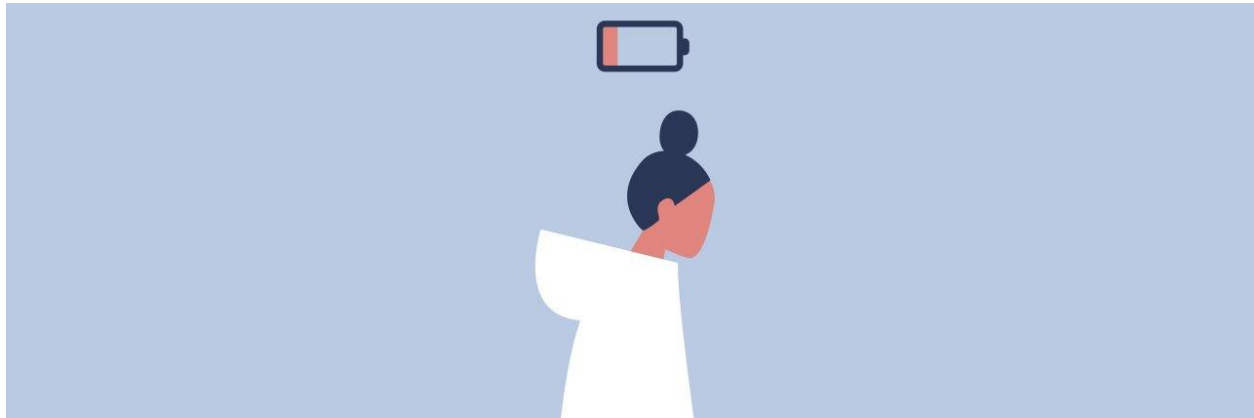
Compassion Fatigue: stress resulting from exposure to a traumatized individual. It is seen as a mixture of vicarious trauma and cumulative burnout, a state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by a depleted ability to cope with one’s everyday environment.

- **Cognitive Symptoms.** Feelings of self-contempt, hopelessness. Questioning self worth and ability to function/be effective. Thinking negatively/ blaming others for their suffering
- **Emotional Symptoms.** Experiencing profound grief and sadness. Reduced ability to feel empathy towards populations being served (both patients and their friends/family), bottling up emotions.
- **Physiological Symptoms.** Headaches, difficulty sleeping, weight loss, chronic pain, poor hygiene.
- **Behavioral Symptoms.** Experiencing dread/avoidance of working with the population being served, increasingly losing passion/drive for work, withdrawing from social supports/usual lifestyle, excessive blaming.

Compassion fatigue comes from strongly identifying with patient suffering and from the empathy that we have toward patients. However, when the caregiving environment becomes increasingly stressful or if there is a rapid increase in very challenging, life-threatening situations (such as Covid-19) then symptoms can occur. Burnout tends to emerge over time in relation to the work environment as a whole. The Mayo Clinic defines burnout as “a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity”. The key to both burnout and compassion fatigue is awareness and to manage it early.

Psychosomatic Stress: Physical symptoms that arise from or are influenced by the mind and emotions rather than a specific organic cause in the body (such as an injury or infection); usually activated by emotional stress.

- **Physiological Symptoms.** Head pain, dizziness, fatigue, stomachaches, increased heart rate, tingling/numbing in the hands and feet, muscle tension, joint pain, jitteriness, rashes, vision obscurity, chest pressure, etc.



Identifying Risk & Protective Factors

A crucial element in realistically being able to maintain self-care techniques is having a consistent supportive environment, both in the professional and personal domain. Also known as **protective factors**, these are attributes/skills/strengths in individuals' and societies' that help people deal more resiliently and effectively with stressful events, while mitigating risk in families and communities. The opposite of protective factors are **risk factors**, which are aspects in individuals' and societies' that lead them to be more susceptible and vulnerable to adverse and/or negative outcomes.

Not sure where you're at when it comes to identifying the healthy factors in your life? Below is a link for a Protective Factors Worksheet, it will help assess where you stand, and what supportive factors you may (or may not) have in your life. It includes a psychoeducational and interactive component:

<https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/protective-factors.pdf>

Health Care Risk Factors

Biophysical

- Chronic medical conditions
- Previous or Recent over-use of alcohol or drugs
- Poor nutrition and lack of sleep
- Physical strain at work
- Working multiple shifts or a period of time without good time off

Psychological

- Stressful life situations including this current pandemic
- Traumatic life experiences
- Witnessing high morbidity rates or needing to make life and death decisions
- Negative view of life

Social

- Isolation or quarantine from family and others
- Having few healthy relationships at work or in the community
- Recent loss, either by death, divorce, or other means
- Bullying, either as the victim or perpetrator
- Discrimination
- Lack of access to support services

Spiritual

- Perception of being irredeemable or inherently flawed beyond repair
- Perception of insignificance
- Conflicting thoughts or doubts surrounding deep religious or spiritual beliefs

Covid-19 Related

Possible contamination / infection
Long hours and increasingly stressful work environments
Lack of or ineffective PPE
Lack of staff
Inattention or neglect by administration

Common Protective Factors

Biophysical

- Healthy diet, and exercise

Psychological

- Reliable support at home
- Emotional self-regulation
- Good coping skills and problem-solving skills
- Subjective sense of self-sufficiency
- Optimism
- Positive self-regard
- Focus on making healthy food and beverage choices

Social

- Ability to make friends and get along with others
- Good peer relationships
- Supportive relationship with family and co-workers
- Participation in sports team, club, community, or religious group
- Economic/Financial Security
- Access to support services

Spiritual

- Future orientation
- Achievement motivation
- Set of moral beliefs

Covid-19 Related

Supportive workplace, policies and administration
Good Mental Health or counselling support
Staff Care Planning
Sense of hope
Collaborative working environment



Creating Healthy Boundaries

Creating and implementing boundaries is an important part of establishing one's self-care routine, and is a crucial aspect to one's mental health and well-being while providing health care. Boundaries can be physical, emotional, and cognitive, and can range from being minimal to a huge change in lifestyle; it depends on the individual, how they are feeling emotionally, and what the circumstances call for. In the work environment it is helpful to have a good relationship with your manager so that you can talk freely about a healthy work-life balance and healthy boundaries on-the-job and between work and personal life.

Being in the healthcare industry/being a frontline worker naturally has us putting others first before ourselves. Because of this mentality, setting boundaries may initially feel selfish, and to some level, even guilty. It is okay to experience this but to simultaneously be patient and understanding with yourself, as setting boundaries are crucial for mental health and wellbeing. Along with this, please keep in mind that others are setting boundaries as well, and that it is important to be mindful and respect their boundaries.

Self-Regulating Techniques (Cognitive & Somatic)

If your symptoms of stress include mental and physical signs such as extreme anxiety, distress, marked cognitive impairment, irritability, mental fog, muscle tension, or exhaustion, relaxation techniques involving mental and somatic actions may help alleviate these symptoms.

Cognitive Regulatory Techniques

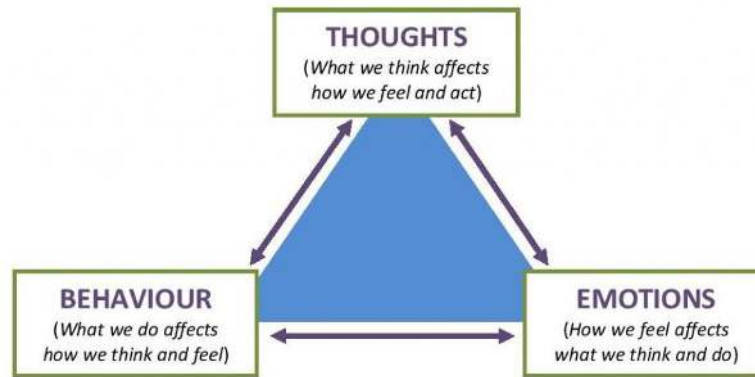
Reframing. It is common for frontline workers to develop cognitive distortions related to fear, helplessness, guilt, anger, sadness, and even rage. Such feelings can lead them to maintain a sense of threat and increased distress within themselves. The initial internal narrative they may have had essentially shifts due to the constant exposure to adverse/traumatic events experienced. In this case, cognitive reframing/restructuring usually helps reframe and essentially rewire an individual's thought process and visceral response to stimuli.

Ex. Feeling Helpless & Fearful

- Negative thought(s) or distortion(s) - *"If I feel so helpless right now ...I can't imagine how I'm supposed to be useful to my coworkers and the populations I'm trying to help when I feel like I'm not doing a good job helping."*
- Reframe(s) - *"I need to remember I'm trying my best, and that I'm not the only one feeling this way at this time. This pandemic is nearly the first of its kind, experienced throughout the whole world, and I need to remember, at the end of the day I'm human, and should let myself experience the fear of the unknown while holding just as much patience and compassion I hold for the people I help, for myself."*

Cognitive Behavioral Techniques

Known widely as CBT, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a short-term form of psychotherapy that integrates behavioral and cognitive theories, is directed at real time/present issues and is based on the notion of the way an individual thinks and feels, affects their behavior. CBT focuses on problem solving while focusing on changing an individuals' thought patterns in order to change their responses to the situation at hand. An example of a "break down" of CBT technique would be separating the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a specific response, and continuously reframing and essentially rewiring the individual to have a healthier response to the stimuli.



Want to explore more? Here is a link with various CBT worksheets that address various responses individuals may be experiencing when in distress. CBT Worksheets: <https://www.psychologytools.com/downloads/cbt-worksheets-and-therapy-resources/>

Bonus! Headspace is a mindfulness and meditation app. It is currently FREE for healthcare providers (& for the recently unemployed!) – all one needs is an email address and their NPI number. Download and use Headspace at: <https://www.headspace.com/health-covid-19>. If you don't know your NPI number, you can search it at: <https://www.npinumberlookup.org/>

Feel free to explore and learn more at <https://www.headspace.com/>.

Somatic Regulatory Techniques - Our Nervous System, its immunity & how to regulate it

Your body is designed to respond to stress. As information comes in, we are subconsciously asking ourselves, “Can I do something about this, or can I not?” Our perception about whether or not we can do something will activate our response. When we perceive that we cannot do something, it can trigger a fight, flight or freeze response (sympathetic) or a shutdown response (dorsal/parasympathetic).

The other part of our nervous system is the part that comes “online” when we have a ‘neuroception’ of safety; this is where the regulation starts. Neuroception is the brain's ability to detect danger. It's how we distinguish whether situations or people are safe or threatening. When we get scared, we orient outside ourselves. We scroll through social media, check news updates regularly, or cluster in communities and groups, all to try and find something to hold on to, to create a sense of safety. But, your sense of safety is not outside yourself, it's within you. The key questions are, “How can I stay connected to myself amidst all the chaos that is happening around me? Can I still create a sense of safety for myself amidst all this fear and unknown?”

Signs & Symptoms of a Regulated & Dysregulated State

Sympathetic Response- Freeze, Flight, Fight Hyper-arousal Symptoms

Hyper-alert
Hyper-vigilant
Increased heart rate
Defensive
“Pounding” sensation in the head
Anxious
Excessive Motoric Activity
Overwhelmed, Disorganized
Highly irritable
Uncontrollable bouts of rage
Aggressive
Dissociation

Parasympathetic/Ventral Vagal Response- Regulated Symptoms (Mindful/“Attached to Self”)

Think logically/clearly
Able to make conscious choices
Able to make eye contact
Display a wide range of emotional expression
Feel “grounded”
Able to notice breath
Sleep Cycles Stable
Poised
Internal awareness of both mind and body
“In the body”
Able to communicate verbally in a clear manner

Parasympathetic/Dorsal Vagal Response- Collapse Hypo-arousal Symptoms

Helplessness
Appear life-less
Non-expressive
Numbing
Lack of motivation
Lethargic/Tired
Dulled capacity to feel significant events
Emotional constriction
Depression
Isolation
Dissociation

Listed below are just some examples of activities that can be used to help regulate a dys-regulated nervous system. It is wise to do these activities pro-actively, as well as in moments of dys-regulation. It is also important to follow the body's innate wisdom back to a regulated/ventral state. These activities are important to be done alone AND with someone.

- Run, jump, spin, dance with pauses to take deep breaths- you can make a game and have child jump high to touch something high on a wall or in a door frame
- Run, jump, etc and crash into something soft (i.e jump on a bed and crash repeatedly)
- Bounce on a yoga ball
- Roll across the floor back and forth
- Sit in a chair and push up with your arms (as if trying to get out of the chair)...keep some resistance
- Massages
- Deep pressure on arms and legs (you can slowly apply pressure down arms and legs in a long stroking motion)
- Eat (particularly something crunchy)
- Drink through a straw
- Take a bath or shower
- Wrap up in a blanket and snuggle (a little tightly for some pressure)- of course, do this safely.
- March or sing during transitions
- Play Mozart music in the background during challenging times of the day if in hyper-arousal
- Play Hard Rock/Fast/Bass music if in hypo-arousal
- Carry heavy things or push heavy things around
- Do isometrics (wall pushups or push hands together (looks like you are praying))
- Walk quickly
- Run up and down steps
- Shake head quickly
- Hang upside down off of a bed or couch
- Play sports
- “Doodle” on paper (this one can be a bit more distracting, but sometimes works)
- Hold or fidget a Koosh ball, rubber band, straw, clay
- Rub gently or vigorously on your skin or clothing
- Put a cold or hot wash cloth on face
- Dim the lights if in hyper-arousal
- Turn on the lights if in hypo-arousal
- Read a book
- Swing
- Learn about “Brain Gym”- tons of ideas
- Yoga
- Snuggle
- Dance
- Move, move, move- any way that it feels good to your body
- Describe what is happening in your body out loud- “My tummy is going in circles”, “My legs feel heavy”, etc...
- Breathe, breathe, breathe- make sure that your inhalation is the same length as your exhalation-

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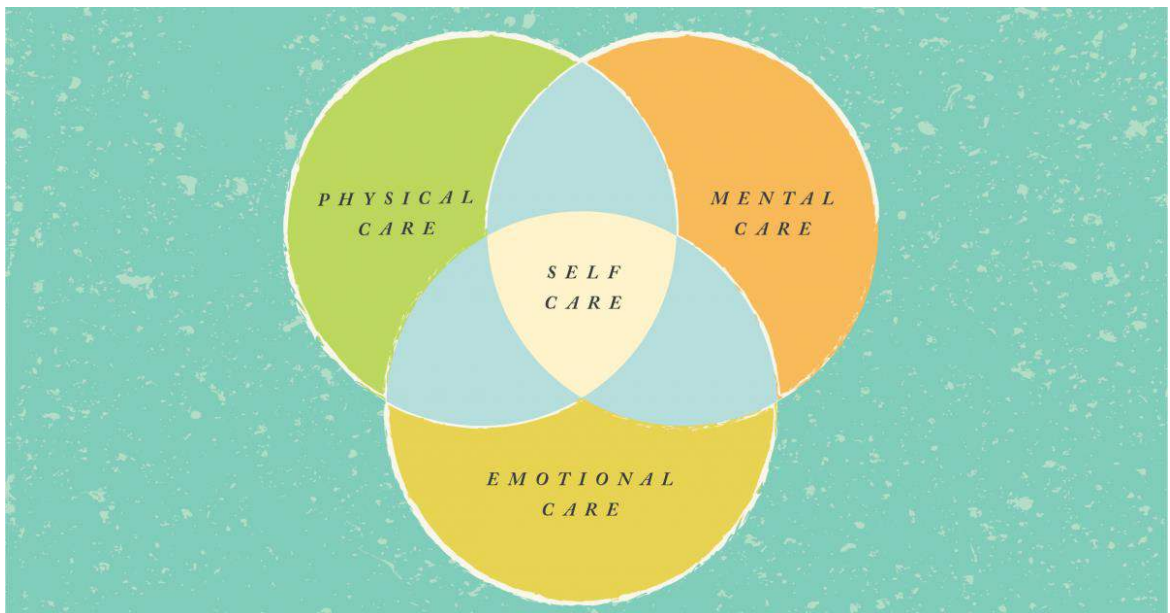
Activities to Help Regulate

How To Support Others While Still Supporting Yourself

The greatest way to provide a sense of safety for others is not trying to avoid, or telling them it will all be okay - it's to orient to ourselves, establish our own sense of inner safety, and then support others in their own sense of safety through their own breath and their own movement. Acknowledge their feelings! *"It's heartbreaking we are going through this right now. It makes sense that you feel scared."* We all feel so all over the place and disconnected that it causes us to question our experience. So let's validate this for ourselves, and for others.

The brain tends to project the worst case scenario when the unknown is lingering about. And when things don't add up in the environment, when they aren't congruent, we can become scared and unsettled. Right now in the current atmosphere, we are surrounded by the unknown and incongruence with so many sources reporting so many different things. To emphasize again, *your response is completely normal, your brain and body are biologically designed to respond just the way it is.* By connecting with ourselves and increasing our ability to stay present, by us being able to be honest and congruent with our experience – this is how we begin connecting to ourselves.

If you notice you are scared and can't stop checking the news, and can't pay attention to what the person in front of you is saying, say that out loud, and then get up, go for a walk, get something to eat, and take some deep breaths. You can be honest and still stay connected to yourself and model regulation to the people around you. We have lost the structure and predictability that we typically rely on. It is crucial to be compassionate and patient with yourself, and to practice self-care for your own mental health and well-being, while also working to serve others.



My Self-Care Plan

Name: _____ Date: _____ Date for
Review: _____

Physical	Spiritual - Meaning	Mental - Emotional	Relational - Social	Covid-19 & Emergency Care

Self Care Plan

Create the plan

Try not to make this another to do list. This plan should feel nourishing to your body and soul, as though you are finally giving yourself permission to take care of yourself and take a break. See it as an essential part of your job and not as something additional.

Take baby steps. Don't overwhelm yourself with unattainable ideals. Start with 5 minutes of meditation vs. 30 minutes. Pick one thing off your plan and try to implement it that first week. Give yourself grace. You don't have to be perfect. This is about changing a way of life and habits and it will take time. Celebrate your small victories.

Don't listen to your inner critic. Your inner critic will tell you that you can't change and you can't try anything new. In stillness, find the voice of your Higher Power or your kinder self and listen to that voice. The most important thing is to be kind to you. You're strong, you can do this.

Make it practical and personal to you. This isn't about comparison or what feels good for someone else, this is about finding things that you love or enjoy, or fills your tank. Practically write it into your schedule – and, if possible, talk to your manager about it - so it doesn't get overtaken by other demands.

Emergency self-care

The Self-care Plan focuses on the kinds of things one does regularly to reduce stress and maintain and enhance well-being. But planning out what you would do under extremely trying circumstances, even though they are rare, is also important. To do this, write down a couple of care planning ideas in the space provided *before* you are faced with a crisis or feel overwhelmed. This is not to suggest that you will invariably face such a situation; the idea is to be prepared *just in case*. This can also be a column for ideas for your current way of handling this Covid-19 pandemic – that might not be a part of your regular care plan if circumstances were different.

Make a commitment

Just like the flight attendant says, you need to put on your own oxygen mask first before you can be of help to others. Take a moment, think it over, and then make your personal commitment to your own self-care. You deserve it! If you find making a commitment to be a challenge, then take some time to explore your reservations. Do you have a tendency to put the needs of others first? The truth is that your self-care is not only essential to your well-being, but it is also a necessary element for you to be effective and successful in honoring your professional and personal commitments.

Accountability

Once you have developed your plan and made your commitment, remember that your workplace manager, friends, family, peers, and/or colleagues may be good additional resources for exchanging new self-care ideas/strategies and to provide support and encouragement.

Follow your plan

Now that you have completed the assessments and worksheets described above, you have identified the core elements of your personal Self-Care Plan. The final step is to implement your plan and keep track of how you are doing. Keeping track of your progress will help you recognize your successes and identify and address any difficulties you may not have anticipated. Don't forget that you can revise your plan as needed. Remember, also, to employ your emergency plan should emotionally difficult circumstances arise. To increase your commitment, it will be helpful to share your plan with a trusted colleague or friend.

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