

Mental Health and COVID-19



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We can see with our own eyes the staggering impact of COVID-19 on our lives and the lives of those around us. Less visible, but no less real, is the other well-known consequence of infectious outbreaks—the psychological effects on our internal worlds and outward behaviors. Our reactions to the mental challenges posed by COVID-19 can be as diverse as the people that make up the Mount Sinai community and our great city, but they still can be categorized. Here’s what you should know about mental health issues likely to arise for you and your co-workers due to COVID-19.

Our Psychological Risks as Healthcare Workers

Just like we need to take extra precautions to protect ourselves from being infected by COVID-19, we also need to be aware of the psychological risks facing healthcare workers. We are at great psychological risk simply by virtue of our exposure to the reality of COVID-19. The severity of that exposure at Mount Sinai can be measured in many ways, but notably by the number of sick patients we see, the number of deaths we witness or learn about, and the number of hours we work. Our hospitals are the “ground zero” of this disaster, and we are the first responders.

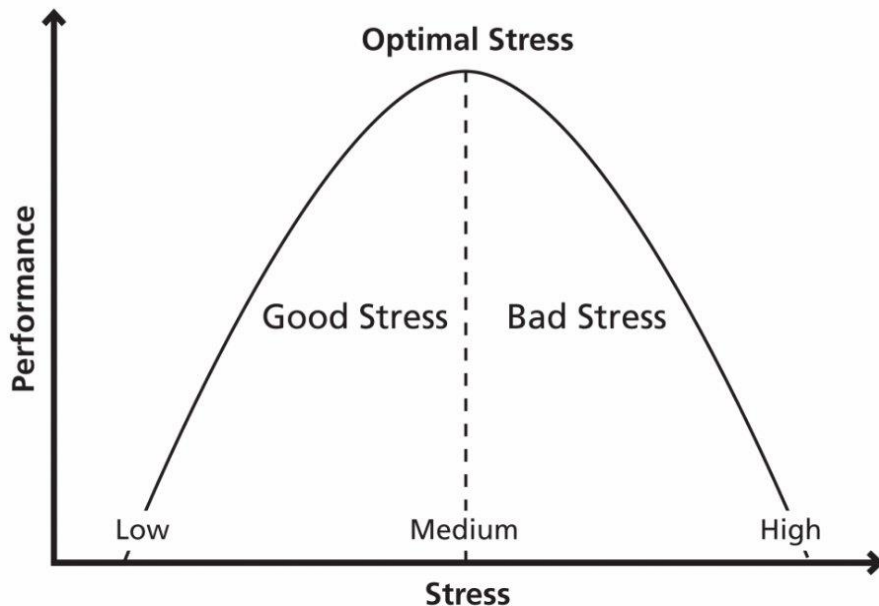
In addition, we may be shouldering personal concerns that can place us at an even greater psychological risk. These can include past or ongoing mental health issues, trauma, and personal issues (e.g., financial stress, relationship problems, etc.), as well as how much support we have available to us now.

Stress, Anxiety, and the Stress Reaction

To put it mildly, the current COVID-19 crisis is subjecting us to extreme stress, which throws us off balance and requires us to marshal our coping skills to regain our footing. Stress often results in what is surely the most common emotion we are all experiencing: anxiety. Anxiety is not only normal, it is necessary, as it spurs us to action. We should not be afraid of it or deny that it exists. However, we should keep in mind that there is a difference between “good stress” and “bad stress.”

The arc of stress reactions, called the Yerkes-Dodson Law, is pictured here:

The Yerkes-Dodson Law



Good stress helps us to perform well, but when the level of stress gets too high, it becomes bad stress. Bad stress tips the balance in the wrong direction, and our ability to function drops off.

Trauma and Distress Reactions

Trauma can be defined in many ways, but, in general, it encompasses the stress caused by life-threatening circumstances that overwhelm our coping skills so that we cannot put things back in balance by ourselves. The stress or trauma of COVID-19 can cause a number of distress reactions that you should be aware of in yourself, your co-workers, and the people in your life.

Emotional reactions. These can include fear, anxiety, guilt, sadness, and/or depression. They can overtake us suddenly, leaving us feeling like we are on an emotional roller coaster.

Physical symptoms. These can include palpitations, shortness of breath, sweating, loss of appetite, and/or dizziness. Sometimes these symptoms may be exacerbations of pre-existing medical problems and require medical attention, but sometimes they are how we experience distress.

Disturbances in thinking or sensations. These typically include confusion, distractibility, nightmares, and/or being hyper-alert.

Behavioral changes. Exposure to trauma can lead people to withdraw, change usual routines, become disorganized, or turn to substances like alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs.

Long-Term Mental Health Problems

When stress or distress reactions become too intense or last too long, they can create a mental health issue. What constitutes an excessively intense or lasting reaction may be apparent to the sufferer, but often requires the assistance of a professional to work through it.

Mental health disorders are invariably the longest lasting effects of disasters. The most common ones that may arise beyond COVID-19 are the following:

Major depression. This involves not only a low mood or a lack of motivation, but a range of symptoms that affect us physically (e.g., changes in sleep patterns, lack of appetite, etc.) and in how we think (e.g., difficulties focusing, suicidal thoughts, etc.).

Post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is an initial fear reaction that does not stop. It outlasts the threat and causes the sufferer to feel and act as though the event is still happening when it is not.

Alcohol use disorder. Events like COVID-19 usually do not create new drinking problems, but can cause past problems to reappear.

Five Key Psychological Strategies

Experts in disaster mental health have reached a consensus on five broad strategies for promoting mental health in ourselves and our co-workers during events like COVID-19:

- Promote a sense of safety
- Promote calm thinking
- Promote a sense of empowerment
- Promote connectedness
- Promote hope

Resilience

While we are concerned about the psychological risks that COVID-19 poses, we should also recognize our resiliency. Whether resilience is defined as stability in the face of adversity or bending, but not breaking, there are well-established behaviors that promote resilience that can help us get through traumatic events and even grow from them. According to Dennis S. Charney, MD, Dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, these are:

- Engage in (realistic) optimism
- Face your fears
- Know and live by your moral compass
- Turn to faith/spirituality

- Establish and nurture a supportive social network
- Find resilience role models
- Attend to your physical well-being
- Develop brain fitness
- Apply cognitive and emotional flexibility to trauma and other challenges
- Find meaning and purpose in things

Self-Care

In another approach to psychological self-protection, the Center for Traumatic Stress Studies of the Uniformed Services University (www.cstsonline.org) recommends the following for healthcare workers:

- Meet your basic needs
- Take breaks
- Connect with colleagues
- Communicate constructively with colleagues
- Contact and connect with family
- Respect differences in how much others want to talk
- Stay updated with information about COVID-19, but limit your exposure to the media
- Do self-check-ins
- Honor your service

Caring for our Children

As we focus on our mental health as healthcare workers during COVID-19, we also worry about the well-being of our children. The mental health of parent and child are intimately connected, and how one goes, so usually goes the other. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry provides excellent fact sheets on discussing COVID-19 and related topics with children at www.aacap.org.

In addition, the basic approach to helping children cope is embodied in *Psychological First Aid for Children and Adolescents* (www.ready.gov) and consists of three principles:

Listen. Pay attention to what children say and how they act.

Protect. Oversee day-to-day life in a way that provides children with an honest exposure to the situation without overwhelming them.

Connect. Reach out to friends, neighbors, teachers, and others in the community.

Help is Available at Mount Sinai

If you need help coping with the COVID-19 crisis, support is available to you. Please visit www.mountsinai.org/about/covid19/staff-resources/well-being for a comprehensive list of resources to support your emotional and mental health needs at this difficult time, as well as information about accessing mental health treatment services.



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