

COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis Response: Supporting a Family Member Who is a Health Care Worker



COVID-19 is impacting our country in unprecedented ways. Much of everyday life has changed, and many of us have experienced hardships we never even imagined prior to the pandemic.

Having a family member who is a health care worker presents special challenges for those who love them. If you are a spouse, significant other, parent, or friend of a health care worker who has been on the frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic, you are likely struggling with how to best support them through this time of crisis. While these health care workers are experiencing the same disruptions and challenges most adults in our country are experiencing, including social isolation, financial insecurities, and extreme changes in daily routines, they are also experiencing unique stressors that cannot be underestimated.

In the early days and weeks of the pandemic, our health care workers had to deal with fear of the unknown and the uncertainty about how to protect themselves and their families from this novel coronavirus. Access to personal protective equipment (PPE) was limited, and concerns grew daily about bed and ventilator availability and the

adequacy of nursing and physician staffing. The physical exhaustion of long hours, the need to don full PPE for every patient contact, continually changing procedures, working in isolation, and being in a constant state of high alert quickly began taking a physical toll.

But the unseen emotional toll may be even greater than the physical toll. Nurses, doctors, and other health care workers all share the challenges of watching so many physically suffer, having patients die alone, supporting family members who can't be at the bedside of their loved ones due to visitor restrictions, and being unable to do more.

We have called these health care workers "heroes," as indeed they are. Now we need to acknowledge that they are also human and require special supports to ensure that their personal physical and emotional needs are met. By understanding their needs, you as a family member or a friend are in a

unique position to provide these tailored supports. Consider the following steps, modeled from the NOVA Crisis Response¹, for supporting your special health care worker throughout this COVID-19 pandemic.

Safety and Security

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs establishes safety and security as a basic need for human beings.² Safety focuses on all aspects of physical safety, including handwashing, social distancing, and wearing masks when in public. Security addresses emotional needs during this pandemic, including communication and connectedness. Remember that for our health care workers, these safety and security priorities are immediate priorities, and are frequently about you (their family) and their patients, as well as themselves.



- Learn, understand, and follow all health and safety recommendations. This will keep the entire family safe and decrease stress for your health care worker.
- Acknowledge and accept your health care worker's personal efforts to keep the family safe. These efforts may include physical distancing as they decide to spend time away or take extra precautions upon returning home from work, such as spending more time disinfecting and cleaning.
- Establish and implement a flexible but consistent daily family schedule. When changes are necessary, include all family members in rearranging the priorities for the day.
- Don't be afraid to overcommunicate. Make no assumptions and give much grace. Don't hesitate to ask, "What do you need right now?"
- Involve your health care worker in family decisions, recognizing that sometimes they may want you to be the day-to-day decision-maker. When possible, provide them with options about how things get done; this will help to provide them with some level of control.
- When life feels out of control, help them focus on those areas of life that are controllable.
- Help your health care worker stay connected. If social distancing is required for physical safety, help them meet their emotional security needs by staying connected virtually. Also understand and support their need to connect with colleagues who are experiencing similar challenges.



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¹National Organization of Victim Assistance. (2009). The community crisis response training manual (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.

²Maslow, A. H. (1943, January). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review* 50(4) 370–396. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

- Recognize the importance of family support. The home can be THE safe place for emotional rejuvenation.
- Provide your health care worker with the space they need for self-care. Remember that their work is both physically and emotionally exhausting. So, help them protect the time they need for sleep, nutrition, quiet, and family.

Ventilation and Validation

As our health care workers strive to establish a sense of safety and security, it is important to provide opportunities for them to tell their stories. We are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. Each of us has experienced this pandemic differently, and each of us needs an opportunity and a safe place to share our personal experiences. Our health care workers need the chance to tell their story (ventilation) and to have their personal reactions and feelings accepted and normalized (validation). A range of fluctuating emotions is common during times of change and uncertainty. We can help our health care workers by providing a safe space for them and encouraging safe emotional expression when they are ready.



- Realize that their need to tell their story is critical. The when, where, who, and how of their story will vary depending on their personal needs. Some will want to share their experiences regularly. Others may prefer to connect with colleagues. Still others may choose another avenue of expression, such as writing or drawing.
- Provide frequent, safe, and private opportunities for storytelling. Open the door by asking, “What is the hardest part of the day for you?” or “What worked well today?”
- Encourage them to identify and stay connected with their colleagues. Encourage participation in work support meetings, debriefings, and calls.
- Listen and validate their emotions and reactions. Acknowledge common responses such as changes in sleep and eating patterns, mood instability, brain fog, and inability to focus. If you are not a health care worker yourself, acknowledge that you can only imagine how difficult the days are and that you are there to listen.



Encourage healthy feelings expression and use of coping skills. Support the use of art, storytelling, music, writing, and even physical activity to work through emotions.

- Never underestimate the importance of quiet—of being that compassionate, caring presence who says, “I am here for you” and “I want to meet you where you are.”
- Encourage healthy feelings expression and use of coping skills. Support the use of art, storytelling, music, writing, and even physical activity to work through emotions. Remember—there are no right or wrong emotions.

- Acknowledge compounding stressors. These may include lack of safety; challenges with homeschooling children; physical distancing that has created social distancing from extended family, peers, and natural support systems; and the inability to participate in usual hobbies, self-expression activities, and other day-to-day activities.

Prediction and Preparation

Prediction helps us establish a new balance by decreasing chaos and anxiety. Preparation allows us to begin making decisions and taking some control of those aspects of life that are controllable.

In the current environment, prediction and preparation are particularly challenging. Sometimes for prediction, we just need to be able to focus on what is going to happen in the next few days and weeks as we help prepare for new challenges and changes. There are still so many unknowns and unanswered questions. We can focus on what we do know today and begin to prepare for the adjustments needed as we seek to find our “new normal.”



- Help your family focus on the short term. Since the future holds many unknowns, establish clear plans for what will happen in the next few days and weeks.
- Collaborate with your health care worker to establish a flexible but consistent schedule. Structure and routine increase a sense of control as well as an understanding of what to expect.
- Initiate family conversations about what will be different and what will stay the same.



- Accept that these changes are challenging and affirm that you will be here for them.
- Prepare and allow for a level of grief and mourning—grief related to the patients who have died from COVID-19 as well as grief over the significant changes that are affecting your health care worker’s professional and personal life.
- Suggest limiting media and news exposure. Time away from both visual and auditory reminders of the pandemic can provide necessary relief and respite. Acknowledge your health care worker’s need for boundaries and monitor your media exposure in their presence.
- Share home responsibilities and initiate conversations about needed changes. Support each other in balancing professional work needs with homeschooling requirements for children and teens; day-to-day home responsibilities (e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundry); and needs for personal self-care.

- Be patient, supportive, and present as you also watch for changes that would signify a need for further supports. Changes in eating, sleeping, and mood are to be expected. Changes that affect a person's ability to function may signal a need for professional help. These changes are often first noted by those who are closest to the health care workers—their families. Depression, anxiety, trauma reactions such as nightmares or intrusive thoughts, and suicidal ideation have been seen in those who daily experience the trauma and challenges of this pandemic. Contact your local crisis or mental health provider or reach out to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1- 800-273-8255 for assistance.

Having a spouse or significant other, a mom or dad, a grandmother or grandfather, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, or other loved one who has been working on the frontlines of the pandemic is not easy. Every day produces a flood of emotions—ranging from pride and love to worry, anxiety, frustration, confusion, anger, and sadness.

Although the nation is now calling your health care worker a “hero,” they have always been a hero to you. And in this time of crisis, you want to relieve some of their burdens and just allow them to be your loved one. By following these steps, you can support your health care worker and acknowledge their unique needs as you journey through this pandemic together.

If you are concerned about a friend or family member who is struggling with the trauma and challenges of this pandemic, contact your local crisis or mental health provider or reach out to the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.**

