

Strategies to support colleagues during COVID-19 pandemic

January 26, 2021

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Article type: [Member Health & Well-Being](#)

Topics: [COVID-19](#), [Infectious Diseases](#)



While health care professionals are adept at navigating unexpected challenges with resilience and tenacity, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused persistent disruption to our personal and professional lives. For many, the allostatic load has built over the past year, and the mental, emotional and physical effects of this toxic stress range from subtle to profound.

Never has it been so critical to optimize wellness practices and look out for the well-being of our colleagues. Following are simple strategies to promote well-being with your health care team.

Identify resources

Familiarize yourself with services available through your employer. Many provide free, confidential and unlimited counseling. In addition, explore local and regional wellness resources, including pandemic-friendly opportunities for physical activity, spiritual practices and social interaction. Share helpful resources with your team.

Foster community

Interpersonal connection can be exceptionally difficult in a socially distanced environment. Encourage team members to use cameras for virtual meetings. Create a virtual gathering, game night or event, such as a

cooking class or exercise class. Or consider asynchronous activities such as group fitness challenges or accountability partners to encourage healthy habits.

Express gratitude

Small expressions of gratitude make a big impact. Gratitude can be delivered in many forms: in-person, by phone, cards, sticky notes, email. Expressing gratitude in any form is better than choosing not to.

If you share office space, create a bulletin board or marker board to express gratitude. For distanced groups, create a virtual bulletin board.

Discuss wellness as a team

Set aside 10 minutes of business meetings to discuss topics related to well-being and provide peer support. Ideas for conversation starters include work-life integration, nutrition, exercise, mindfulness, stress management or helpful resources.

Alternatively, try appreciative inquiry, where each team member recognizes something positive or aspirational. For example, ask: “What has brought you joy this week?” or “What are you looking forward to?”

Create and respect boundaries

As clinical duties, nonclinical expectations and family care responsibilities change, so too must personal-professional boundaries. Take time to reflect on your own boundaries for work, such as working at night, on weekends and during days off. In addition, be cognizant and respectful of your colleagues’ boundaries, which also may have changed significantly during the pandemic. If you are in a leadership position, discuss, encourage and respect boundaries among your team members.

Connect with colleagues

Reach out to team members. A question as simple as, “How are things going?” may open the door to conversation. In addition, if your team has encountered recent adverse events, consider offering small or large group debriefings. The goal of debriefing is to listen and support rather than fix. Find resources on how to conduct debriefings at <https://bit.ly/2Lv8hxy>.

Take care of yourself

Time to recharge is vital to your well-being and also benefits your patients and health care team. If you’re having trouble finding time to decompress, try scheduling it. Start with five minutes per day doing something that brings you joy, health and calm, then gradually “up-titrate.”

Here’s to your well-being and the well-being of your team in 2021.

Dr. Foradori is co-lead of the AAP Section on Hospital Medicine subcommittee on physician wellness.

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