



Ascension

Ascension WI EAP

Providing Care in the Midst of Chaos

And How You Can Care for Yourself

As frontline workers, physicians, nurse practitioners, and health care providers know the fatigue and exhaustion, not to mention the anxiety and moral distress, that comes from caring for those who are suffering. Caring for others is difficult even under the best circumstances, but during times of crisis it can become overwhelming. Not only are you caring for those in need, but you are also trying to adapt and adjust your own life. Though times may be difficult, don't despair! You know the metaphor--on an airplane you must put on your own oxygen mask before helping others, and now is the time to do just that. This article will offer help and hope, so you can build your resilience and be well, even amidst the chaos.

What Is a Crisis?

Most people will go through difficult or stressful life circumstances. In most instances these are not considered a crisis. Dictionary.com defines crisis as "a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger" or "a time when a difficult or important decision must be made." Wikipedia.com states that "a crisis is any event that is going to lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, community, or whole society." Crisis events are unusual and extreme, and can include things like pandemics, natural disasters, or financial hardships.

Normal Reactions to Crisis

Everyone responds differently. Some people may not be bothered much at all, while others may have extreme reactions and symptoms. Some people describe stress reactions as our body's normal response to abnormal situations. Symptoms can be broken down into a few categories:

Physical: During a crisis many people find they can't eat or sleep. This is completely normal. In response to the extreme circumstances, your body releases "fight or flight" chemicals that shut down your digestive and immune systems, and focus only on survival. You may feel jittery, keyed up, on edge, or irritable and find it difficult to relax. These feelings may last days or weeks, but should gradually reduce over time. After a few days or weeks you might feel tired, fatigued or even exhausted. Some people describe wanting to crawl into bed and never come out. This, too, is normal, and it is completely fine to give your body a few days of rest. If, however, after several days you still lack energy and want to sleep all the time you may be experiencing beginning stages of depression and should consider seeking professional help.

Cognitive: During a crisis your mind may be on high alert, and your emotional centers are picking up information that may later be

recalled through flashbacks or dreams. For example, you may have a patient scenario that you have encountered many times in the past. Maybe the person had gruesome wounds, or maybe the person was deeply troubled by recent events and you felt a high level of compassion. Normally this wouldn't bother you, but during times of high stress you may find that you are more affected by these kinds of situations, or maybe days later you find that you are still thinking about that particular patient.

In addition to being uncharacteristically bothered by certain things, you may find that you intensely remember some details, but have difficulty remembering other things, or have a hard time concentrating in general. These are all very normal reactions during a crisis. Over time, however, these symptoms should decrease, and your ability to concentrate and focus on daily tasks should improve.

Emotional: It's no wonder that many people feel rattled and unstable in the days and weeks following a crisis. People tend to feel vulnerable and want to draw closer to family and friends. Some people get a new perspective on life; others become angry and experience a crisis of faith. There is no right or wrong way to feel, but if the negative, destructive or angry thoughts and feelings persist longer than a few days or weeks, you may want to consider talking to a professional who can help you heal and cope.

The Physician's Response to Crisis

Health care workers are helpers and healers --some have even said "heroes." While others are panicking and looking for answers, health care providers are going to work everyday,

offering all the answers, help and hope they can muster. Though they are also human beings, experiencing the same stress reactions, fears and anxieties that other people are, they shove those aside to be fully present and diligent in their work. They offer comfort, protection, guidance and healing to those in need. But what if they don't have answers? What happens if the provider begins to lose hope? How can they cope when life on top of work becomes overwhelming and unmanageable?

Stay Connected

Physicians, nurse practitioners, and other healthcare providers are all in this together. No one understands quite like your team, so reach out. Stay connected. Write a note, give a hug or ask how your teammate is doing. Social connection is a major factor in recovery from all types of injuries--physical and mental, so don't try to muscle through this alone.

Reconnect with Spirituality

Research demonstrates that spirituality has a major effect on our mental health. Many people confuse religion with spirituality, but spirituality can easily be understood in two ways: 1). Connection to something bigger than yourself (God, community, nature, humanity, etc.) and 2). Identifying and living out the purpose of your life.

There's no doubt our world has been shaken. We are no longer living in a "business as usual" society, so take this opportunity to reconnect with your spirituality. Seek answers to the deeper things of life--what are we here for? What is the meaning of it all? What good will come from this? What is my part in all of it?

What gives me a sense of security and hope?
Where do I place my trust?

These are difficult questions, but in lieu of all that's happened (and is happening) it is immensely important to seek these answers and ground ourselves in truth. Not only will you find a deeper sense of security which leads to inner peace, but you will gain a renewed sense of purpose and even joy when you align yourself with the things that matter most.

Take Good Care of Yourself

Most people find that recovery happens naturally over time. It is always important to engage in self-care, but during a time of crisis it is especially important. Here are some things you can do to foster resilience (and as health care providers you know all this stuff already, but it never hurts to have a reminder):

- Avoid TV, news, articles, music, movies or video games that depict violence or danger. Give your brain a break.
- Eat a healthy diet high in vitamins and nutrients. Drink plenty of water.
- Get a little exercise every day. You may not feel up to running a marathon, but a walk around the block could really help, especially in fresh, clean air.
- Get plenty of rest. Even if you can't sleep, there is value in rest.
- Pay attention to how you are doing. Don't push yourself too hard. Give yourself permission to slow down and heal. Take breaks, and say no where you can.
- Find ways to discuss and express your thoughts, feelings and emotions—by yourself and with others.

- Find support in family, friends, faith communities, and support groups.
- Practice mindfulness, meditation, or relaxation exercises regularly.
- Never underestimate the power of a deep breath. Deep breathing is a powerful tool that is always available to you.
- Look for silver linings. People grow through difficult trials and tribulations. Consider how the crisis has impacted you and how your resilience and character have grown as a result (this may take weeks, months or even years to determine).

Additional Help

There are many mental health professionals who specialize in helping people heal from difficult circumstances, stress, crisis and trauma. A good place to start is with a counselor from your EAP. They can meet with you and will offer strategies to help you cope, as well as be a safe place for you to process your thoughts and feelings in a confidential setting. You don't have to struggle alone. Call today! We're here for you.

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