

Nurses' Guide to Mental Health Support Services

As a nurse on the front lines of managing care during the COVID-19 pandemic, you are encountering unique challenges and stressors unlike any other. The realities of the situation are changing your ability to provide care to your patients, spend time with your family, and go about your daily life. The stress may be affecting you physically, interpersonally, and emotionally more than anything you've ever experienced.

You will likely feel a range of reactions to stress and trauma you experience during this pandemic. What might this look like for you? **Here are some common symptoms of excessive stress:**



Physical Symptoms: rapid heart rate, muscle tension, headaches, GI distress, difficulty breathing, high startle response, nausea, nightmares or flashbacks, chronic exhaustion.



Sleep Disturbance: nightmares, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.



Emotional Responses: anger, fear, frustration, irritability, anxiety, sadness, guilt, difficulty maintaining emotional balance.



Difficulty Thinking Clearly: Disorientation or confusion, difficulty problem-solving or making decisions, difficulty concentrating or remembering instructions.



Problematic or Risky Behaviors: Unnecessary risk taking, increased use of alcohol or drugs to numb.



Social Impacts: blaming others, conflicts with coworkers or family members, withdrawal and isolation, becoming clingy or needy.

For many, these feelings will subside with time as we begin to recover. The important thing is to develop coping mechanisms and find the support you need to address this stress. This support will look different for each person.

You are not alone. There is help and support available.



WHEN TO SEEK IMMEDIATE HELP

If you feel overwhelmed by sadness, depression, anxiety, or hopelessness, or have had or begun to act on thoughts of killing or hurting yourself, **call 911**. You can also call or text one of these crisis hotlines for immediate response:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline:

1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746

Crisis Text Line:

Text HOME to 741741

When to Seek Social & Peer Support

All nurses should seek out social and peer support during this time of increased stress. Talking with people who might understand what you are going through can help normalize your experience, help you process your compassion fatigue and trauma, and reduce your stress. Keep in mind that peer support is not the same thing as mental health services or treatment.

Here are some ways to do this:

Use a Warmline

Warmlines provide in-person free and confidential support when you need someone to just listen. You'll be able to speak to someone who is empathetic about what you are going through.

- Download the Happy App, a nurse-specific platform that gives you access a team able to offer support 24/7 at gethappy.app.link/ANA
- Visit www.nami.org for their listing of Warmlines that give you access to speak with someone who has experienced a mental health or substance use issue and may understand what you are experiencing.



Join a Peer Support Group

A peer support group gives you the opportunity to both give and receive support with other nurses. This creates a sense of shared experience between you and your colleagues, reminding you that you are not in this alone.

To find a peer support group:

- Join Nurses Together: Connecting Through Conversations for peer-to-peer video calls at www.ena.org/nursestogether.
- Ask your Human Resources Department or Employee Assistance Program about peer support groups or similar services organized through your workplace.
- Search online for substance use support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Smart Recovery, and others.

YOU SHOULD SEEK OUT MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT...



When to Seek Mental Health Treatment

First, it's important to know that most people who experience impacts to their mental health and get the help they need recover completely.

And, there are a range of licensed mental health professionals who provide therapy, medication management, and more.

During the pandemic, you will likely see these providers through a telehealth platform.

If you experience:

- Confused thinking
- Prolonged depression (sadness or irritability)
- Feelings of extreme highs and lows
- Excessive fears, worries and anxieties
- Social withdrawal
- Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits

If your stress reactions:

- Interfere with your daily functioning
- Persist for several weeks

- Strong feelings of anger
- Delusions or hallucinations
- Growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities
- Suicidal thoughts
- Denial of obvious problems
- Numerous unexplained physical ailments
- Substance abuse

- Continue to worsen
- Are overwhelming

Get Started:

LOCATE THE SERVICES YOU NEED

There are several places you can go for information to locate the services you need.

HUMAN RESOURCES:

Your HR department can advise you on your insurance coverage and your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which provides free and confidential assessments, short-term counseling, referrals, and follow-up services.

YOUR INSURANCE COMPANY:

Grab your insurance card and call or go online for referral contacts, providers in your network, and information about coverage. Ask for 3+ mental health providers in your area who accept your insurance and if your plan covers counseling, support groups, and/or therapy.

A NATIONAL HELPLINE:

Call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services' National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for 24/7 free and confidential treatment options and information.

YOUR LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH DIVISION/COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTER:

Access state-funded free or low-cost treatment and services. (The division will be obligated to first serve individuals who meet "priority population criteria" as defined by the state Mental Health Department.)

ONLINE TREATMENT LOCATOR:

Go to findtreatment.samhsa.gov to search for mental health and substance use treatment facilities in your zip code.

YOUR PRIMARY CARE PROVIDER:

Discuss your needs with your PCP and get advice on which type of mental health support may be the best fit for you, as well as if the services are covered by your insurance and require a referral.

Taking the first step to locate mental health services might feel intimidating, but it doesn't need to! There are a variety of confidential access points you can choose from to find a provider. If you feel uncomfortable going to your employer, that's ok. You might want to start with your primary care provider or call a helpline. If you'd rather not speak with someone, you can go to your insurance company's website or use a national online treatment locator.



What about possible impacts on your career?

The Joint Commission recently released a statement supporting the removal of barriers and policies that inhibit health care staff from seeking mental health care. They recognize that it is critical that you feel empowered to seek out the mental health resources you need – without fear of stigma or professional consequences.

To Get the Mental Health Services You Need:

1

Use the contact information you've gathered to call or go online and schedule an appointment. If you do not feel able to make the appointment, ask a friend or family member for help.



Be sure to ask:

- Are you taking new patients?
- Do you take my insurance? (If you have insurance)
- Do you provide counseling, support groups, therapy, medication management, or a tailored mix of services?
- Do you specialize in an area, like work stress, compassion fatigue, addictions, or trauma?



Schedule your appointment for the soonest available time that works for you.

- If there is a long wait, ask to join the waitlist so that you can be notified if an earlier time becomes available.
- If you found the provider online through your insurance, see if there is a link on their site to schedule an appointment. Many offer New Client appointments that are earlier than those scheduled by the offices themselves.

2

At your first appointment, be honest about what you need!



Write down and bring the specifics of what you want to discuss so that you do not forget. Information you might want to have ready:

- What you do as a nurse and your support systems (family, friends, etc.)
- The experiences and feelings that led you to this appointment, and how long you have noticed them.
- Any existing conditions, any mental health or substance use treatment you have had in the past, and any medications you have tried and how they worked for you.
- What you hope to get out of treatment. (If you're not sure, that's ok!)



Questions you might want to ask:

- How do you plan to help me?
- How will I know if we are a good fit?
- What will my treatment look like moving forward?
- How often will we meet?
- How long should resolving the issue take?
- Could you recap for me what we discussed today?

Note: Mental health and substance use treatment is not one-size-fits-all. Do not be afraid to ask for what you need. If you are not comfortable with your provider, it is okay to switch and find someone different whose approach better meets your needs.

3

Build a relationship. This professional is there to offer confidential support and care. You will set goals together and work towards managing your stressors, improving your symptoms and functioning, and developing your relationships with significant people in your life.

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