

Working with Resilience and Self Care When High Profile Public Health Concerns Arise

Physicians are a well trained resilient group of professionals who typically manage the challenges and stresses they face effectively. Resilience is an acquired ability to overcome adversity by being flexible and using a range of practical skills to fit the situation at hand. Resilience is correlated with having access to relationships in which one feels supported and valued.

There are familiar and novel challenges associated with the high volume high profile events such as the 2009 flu season. Three challenges to be aware of at this time are: workload and intensity can increase quickly and remain excessive, particularly if colleagues become ill or you are also personally responsible for young children or elderly parents; in the early stages of high profile public health events credible information is affected by rumours and misconceptions; and when health care resources are prioritized and allocated, ethical and moral dilemmas may arise.

This handout provides some practical information to support your optimal performance and resilience when there are high profile and widespread health concerns in your community.

Staying well and mitigating stress

- **Stress response reactions will be universal and usually temporary.**
- **A healthy lifestyle**—including proper diet, exercise and rest —is your best defence against any stress or disease threat
- **Backup plans**
 - Have a personal/family plan to address concerns and share responsibilities should you or a family member become ill
 - Have work plans should you become ill, or if someone you count on becomes ill
- **Taking care of your family**
 - During a public health emergency the best predictor of children’s emotions and coping is the parental emotions and coping behaviour
 - Communicate with your children with honest and age-appropriate information. If there are concerns, addressing these together may ease anxiety and distress
 - Notice and limit the exposure of your children to sensationalized news stories and be available to clarify news reports
 - Maintain usual routines and schedules as much as possible.
 - Have supports in place should schools close

- **Practical Self Care Tips**
 - Give yourself time to recuperate
 - Try to keep a normal schedule, especially your usual pattern of sleeping and waking.
 - Don't work around the clock. Set reasonable limits on how much you can accomplish
 - At busy times plan on healthy snacks and limit 'fast foods', caffeine and alcohol
 - Unwind through physical exercise and / or relaxation techniques
 - When feeling stressed connect with family, friends or co-workers
 - Discuss the problematic incidents with someone you trust
 - Pretending that nothing is wrong when stressed is at best a short term strategy for coping
 - In high stress events miscommunication and misunderstanding can arise
 - Try not to personalize interpersonal conflicts
 - Look for the learning without harsh self-criticism or blaming
 - Take breaks from reading about, watching the news or talking about the stressful events
 - Keep a sense of humour

- **Communication tips**
 - Communicating well with each other is vital, yet it can be affected by fatigue and stress
 - Active listening to concerns of others builds trusting relationships
 - Facts plus trust empowers others to hear advice and take action
 - People hear information better when delivered in calm and reassuring manner.
 - If you have limited time let people know in advance rather than abruptly cutting off a conversation
 - Media can provide important messages to the public but can dramatize and over focus on the rare troubling events or rumours.

- **Keep connected**
 - Maintaining social networks can foster a sense of normalcy, and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress.
 - With your colleagues it is helpful to remember that commiserating, offering encouragement to get rest, recuperate and sleep etc. or anything that promotes wellbeing is useful
 - If officials have recommended limiting your social contact to contain an outbreak, you can stay connected via social media sites, e-mail and telephone.

- **Resilient thinking**
 - Having a realistic approach which includes the belief in one's capacity to manage and influence life events and the acceptance of what cannot be controlled or changed
 - Flexible thinking and decision-making includes matching the appropriate behavioural/affective responses to the stressful conditions/ context – this where mental readiness meets emotional intelligence
 - Urgent high stakes conditions require both quick thinking and the ability to pause, reflect and consider course corrections
 - Use meaning-focused coping. Serious stress is much easier to tolerate if it feels like your effort is serving a greater purpose
 - Persistent negative beliefs or appraisals of the events tend to undermine self and collective efficacy
 - When holding high performance expectations balance self criticism and self- reassurance

For Further information and Support

- **Physician Health Program, OMA**
A confidential program for physicians and family members experiencing family or occupational distress, mental health and substance use problems. PHP offers support, advice, referral, case management and advocacy services. *Confidential Toll Free: 1.800.851.6606* or www.phpoma.org
- **Ontario Medical Association - click for members**
www.oma.org
- **Pandemic Influenza Stress Vaccine.** Online course to address stress-provoking issues related to working through an outbreak. www.msh-healthyinds.com/stressvaccine
- Public Health Agency of Canada website: www.fightflu.ca
- **Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) Professional Resources: Guidelines and Tools**
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/ccom/flu/h1n1/pro/>
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