

## Leadership During COVID-19: Strategies to Support Yourself and Your Team

The impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on our world is immense and ever evolving. In response, your day-to-day work as a leader within the field of domestic violence and sexual assault is being challenged like never before. We recognize that as leaders you already have a robust and effective toolkit you rely on; however, since this disaster's breadth is unlike anything we've experienced since the Flu Pandemic of 1918, we feel compelled to offer additional support and considerations to sustain you as you guide staff and serve survivors.

### Essential Practices to Implement Now If You Haven't Already

**Stay informed.** Obtain the latest information about the virus from credible public health resources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or the World Health Organization (WHO) [www.who.int](http://www.who.int), in order to provide accurate information.

**Communicate with staff.** When an organization is in crisis, communicating often is necessary. Be consistent with your communications. Ensure that you provide good quality communication and accurate information updates to all staff. Staff need to know when they can expect to hear from you and how. Regular updates offer stability. Be sure not to skip an update, even if there is no new information to report since the last update.<sup>1</sup> Consider ways to lessen the ambiguity people are facing through your communications. Keep staff updated on expectations and next steps. In addition to full staff communications, opportunities for staff to connect one-on-one with leadership are important. Include such in your staff communications plan and be prepared to listen and share some of your own concerns.

Communicate regularly with survivors accessing services too, no matter if they remain in emergency shelter, are receiving outreach support remotely, or are temporarily sheltered in a hotel. Provide regular updates at scheduled times so survivors know when to expect them. Offer a set time to process survivor concerns and answer questions.

**Correct misinformation.** Misinformation can spread quickly and easily, causing unnecessary alarm and potentially exacerbating our reaction to the crisis. If advocates present you with inaccurate information, correct their misconceptions and direct them to the recent update and vetted public health resources. Misinformation can create unnecessary distress. Factual information is critical in mitigating the pandemic's impact.

**Limit media exposure.** Encourage limits to media exposure and explain why it can be harmful. Research has shown that excessive media exposure to coverage of stressful events increases negative mental health outcomes. Encourage advocates and survivors to rely on trusted media sources to gather needed information, and only *when necessary*. Avoid overexposure.

**Remember to eat and stay hydrated.** This may seem too basic to list, but it's very common and understandable to forget to eat and stay hydrated during a crisis. Becoming biologically deprived puts you at risk and may also compromise your ability to problem-solve, make decisions, and ultimately lead effectively. Eating and staying hydrated optimize your ability to provide care for yourself and others. It's easy to forget because you were too busy or didn't feel like eating or drinking when you normally do. Consider setting an alarm to remind you and then stick with it.

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<sup>1</sup> "How to Lead Virtually in a Time of Pandemic." Forbes. Found at: <https://bit.ly/forbes-lead-virtually>

When staff begin to come back to the office, help *them* eat and stay hydrated. Make snacks and liquids available and easily accessible and encourage staff to take advantage of them.

**Consider medications.** Ensure survivors using prescription drugs have adequate supplies of medications to avoid interruption in dosing during potential disruptions of pharmacy supply chains. Encourage survivors to request a three-month supply when feasible. Encourage advocates to strategize with survivors about safe ways to store and access their medication if they are living with an abusive partner.

### Prioritize Advocates' Mental Health (and Your Own)

- As leaders, we realize you are doing your best to support advocates' mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Continue to protect advocates as best you can from increasing the stress they are already experiencing. Keep in mind that the current situation is expected to go through various phases where stay-at-home orders will lessen as cases level off and become stricter when cases once again rise. When planning, consider a longer-term response rather than repeated short-term crisis responses.
- Rotate workers from higher stress to lower stress functions. Partner inexperienced workers with their more experienced colleagues. The buddy system helps to provide support, monitor stress, and reinforce safety procedures.<sup>2</sup> Initiate, encourage, and monitor work breaks. Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member affected. Ensure that you build in time for colleagues to provide social support to each other.
- Ensure that staff are aware of where and how they can access mental health and psychosocial support services and facilitate access to such services.
- Orient all staff on how to provide basic emotional and practical support, for example using Psychological First Aid (PFA). PFA is a humane, supportive, and practical evidence-informed approach to helping people affected by a disastrous event such as a pandemic. It offers a framework for supporting people in ways that respect their dignity, culture, and abilities. To learn more about PFA, check out the following resources:
  - Johns Hopkins University's Center for Public Health Preparedness offers free online PFA training: <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-public-health-preparedness/training/online/mental-health-trainings.html>
  - World Health Organization offers a PFA field guide here: [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/publications/guide\\_field\\_workers/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/)
- Prepare for survivor guilt.

*"The guilt of feeling lucky to be alive is heavy. It's like the weight of the ocean's walls crushing, uncontrolled by levees." – Patience Carter, Pulse nightclub shooting survivor*

People may experience feelings of guilt after surviving a situation where others perished. They may feel guilt for surviving, guilt for not doing something they believe they should have, or guilt over what they did do.<sup>3</sup> Survivor guilt is a common reaction to traumatic events and it can be highly distressing for those who develop it. Survivor guilt is defined as feelings of guilt that occur after surviving a life-threatening, traumatic event when others did not. It can occur when survivors feel responsible for the death or injury of others, even if the survivor had no real power or influence in the situation.<sup>4</sup> For example,

<sup>2</sup> "Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak." World Health Organization.

<sup>3</sup> <https://artherapyinternational.org/traumatic-events-coping-with-survivors-guilt-afterwards/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6230928/>

people may struggle to make sense of why a family member died from COVID-19, while they experienced mild symptoms. Talk about survivor guilt with staff collectively and one-on-one. Share information about it, normalize it, and help staff look out for it among themselves and survivors.

**Be informed about stress responses.** Distress is common in the context of the fear and uncertainty caused by pandemics.<sup>5</sup>

- Acknowledge and normalize distress responses.
- Assist staff in recognizing their own distress responses and health risk behaviors. Encourage self-monitoring and awareness as well as regular check-ins with advocates, their family members, or friends. Recognizing and addressing these responses early can help prevent them from becoming problems.
- Discuss strategies to reduce distress, including:
  - Staying prepared.
  - Taking everyday preventive measures (e.g., hand washing techniques, coughing and disinfecting practices, wearing masks).
  - Maintaining restful sleep, eating regular meals, and exercising.
  - Limiting use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.
  - Talking to loved ones about worries and concerns.
  - Practicing calming strategies, including diaphragmatic breathing and muscle relaxation.
    - 4-7-8 breathing, or relaxing breath, helps you concentrate on deep breaths. The practice is simple: breathe in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 7, and breathe out for a count of 8. Practicing this for 4 breaths 4 times each day or more can help relieve anxiety and reset the autonomic nervous system.



Image courtesy of Healthy at Hopkins, an employee health resource at Johns Hopkins Medicine.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Emotional Wellbeing: Tips for Healthy Routines and Rhythms During Unpredictable Times." Psychiatric Times. Found at: <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/covid-19-pandemic-and-emotional-wellbeing-tips-healthy-routines-and-rhythms-during>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-practicing-wellness-while-you-stay-at-home?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=Facebook&utm\\_campaign=Coronavirus&utm\\_term=CoronavirusPracticingWellnessWhileYouStayAtHome&utm\\_content=Health&fbclid=IwAR2ucuvsd2gH6Ywf0k08-bTAWU4ny8PPHhYz6zXI8foMgmq0eesmwH0IH8](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-practicing-wellness-while-you-stay-at-home?utm_medium=social&utm_source=Facebook&utm_campaign=Coronavirus&utm_term=CoronavirusPracticingWellnessWhileYouStayAtHome&utm_content=Health&fbclid=IwAR2ucuvsd2gH6Ywf0k08-bTAWU4ny8PPHhYz6zXI8foMgmq0eesmwH0IH8)

- Five minute meditation to release anxiety:  
[https://www.yogajournal.com/videos/5-minute-meditation-to-release-anxiety?fbclid=IwAR2kKK7\\_aqzMPiP6Is5VDgDKsV72Wso7IZ5PTXysx5NQE8gZN9pg0zQrddA](https://www.yogajournal.com/videos/5-minute-meditation-to-release-anxiety?fbclid=IwAR2kKK7_aqzMPiP6Is5VDgDKsV72Wso7IZ5PTXysx5NQE8gZN9pg0zQrddA)
- Refer to a trusted, specialized mental health provider when a staff member experiences severe emotional distress. Ensure staff are fully aware of the mental health support your organization provides via your healthcare plan, for example. Share and update resources as they become available such as the Crisis Text Line: <https://www.crisistextline.org/>.

### Strategies to Promote Resilience

Your organization needs you, staff need you, the people you serve need you, but how do you maintain your wellbeing to sustain your ability to lead? As a leader, we cannot overemphasize the importance of taking care of yourself. You may not know what you need right now; you have never been in this moment, under these circumstances. Sorting this out for yourself will only amplify the appreciation you have for those around you who are also trying to do the same. This is an extraordinarily equalizing time—a shared human experience. Lead from that common denominator and you will position your team to thrive through the uncertainty.

**Sleep is our best defense.** When faced with major upheavals in our lives—such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—our body clocks have much more difficulty re-establishing regular biological rhythms. Your biological clock system may be confused or challenged, resulting in the possibility of negative physical symptoms such as disturbed sleep, appetite, energy, and mood.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Our immune system and sleep:**

A 2015 study found a direct link between shorter sleep times and an increased risk of getting a cold for healthy adults ages 18 to 55; specifically, those sleeping less than five hours or between five and six hours had a greater likelihood of catching a virus than those sleeping for seven hours a night.<sup>8</sup> The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends seven to eight hours of sleep a night.

The science is simple: a good night's sleep supports the production and release of cytokine, a protein that helps the immune system quickly respond to antigens—foreign substances which cause the body's immune response to kick in. Helping your body clock to stay on track during major life disruptions such as the pandemic may help you feel better.

Here are some easy tips for improving the regularity of your daily routines, which may in turn help with your sleep cycles and overall health, even when nothing about your life feels regular.

#### **Self-management strategies for increasing regularity of daily routines:**

- Set up a routine for yourself while you are in quarantine or working from home; routines help stabilize body clocks.
- Get up at the same time every day; a regular wake time is the most important input for stabilizing your body clock.

<sup>7</sup> "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Emotional Wellbeing: Tips for Healthy Routines and Rhythms During Unpredictable Times." Psychiatric Times. Found at: <https://www.psychiatrytimes.com/view/covid-19-pandemic-and-emotional-wellbeing-tips-healthy-routines-and-rhythms-during/>

<sup>8</sup> "How to Get More Sleep Tonight." New York Times. Found at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/style/self-care/sleep-tips-benefits-coronavirus.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&fbclid=IwAR2-09g8bGanizNw22\\_6GmnUANtKRPrPAZFH9\\_L1MDr6Dns9sWGZoPq4s0Q](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/style/self-care/sleep-tips-benefits-coronavirus.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&fbclid=IwAR2-09g8bGanizNw22_6GmnUANtKRPrPAZFH9_L1MDr6Dns9sWGZoPq4s0Q)

- If possible, make sure you spend some time outdoors every day, especially in the early morning; your body clock is regulated by the light-dark cycle.
- If you can't go outside, try to spend at least two hours by a window, looking into the daylight and focusing on being calm.
- Set times for a few regular activities such as home tutoring, telephone calls with a friend, or cooking. If possible, do these activities at the same time each day.
- Exercise every day, ideally at the same time each day.
- Eat meals at the same time every day; if you're not hungry, at least eat a small snack.
- Social interactions are important, even during physical distancing. Seek out "back and forth" social interactions where you share thoughts and feelings with another person in real time; videoconferencing, telephone, and real-time text messaging are preferred over scrolling through messages. Schedule these interactions at the same time every day.
- Avoid naps during daylight hours, especially later in the day; if you must nap, restrict the nap to 30 minutes—napping can make it hard to fall asleep at night.
- Avoid bright light (especially blue light) in the evening (e.g., computer screens, smartphones); blue spectrum light suppresses the hormone that helps us sleep.
- Stick to a consistent sleep and wake time that fits your natural rhythms. If you are a night owl, it's okay to stay up a little bit later and get up a little bit later than others in the household, but make sure you go to sleep and get up at the same time every day.

Finally, here are some self-care strategies to help sustain you through what may be a very long haul.

#### **Strategies for sustaining personnel wellbeing:**

- **Take breaks.** Rest and relaxing activities can provide a helpful distraction, yet we know resting and engaging in activities that help relax us is tough to do when in a crisis. Give yourself a rest from work. This is the most important time to try to keep up with the routine things in your life that give you joy or sustain you. Whenever possible, allow yourself to do something unrelated to work that you find comforting, fun, or relaxing. Taking a walk, listening to music, reading a book, or talking with a friend can help. Some people may feel guilty if they are not working full-time or are taking time to enjoy themselves when so many others are suffering. Recognize that taking appropriate rest leads to proper care of others after your break. If in a leadership role, role model this behavior and set procedures in place that allow advocates to take genuine breaks.
- **Stay connected.** Giving and receiving support from family, friends, and colleagues can reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Encourage colleagues.** Make sure staff know how much they are valued and supported during this time of uncertainty. Remember to share words of encouragement.
- **Stay updated.** Rely on trusted sources of information. Participate in work meetings where relevant information is provided.
- **Self/colleague check-ins.** Monitor yourself for signs of increased stress. Monitor yourself over time for any symptoms of depression or stress disorder: prolonged sadness, difficulty sleeping, intrusive memories, hopelessness. Talk to a peer. Seek professional help if needed.
- **Respect differences.** Some people need to talk while others need to be alone. Recognize and respect these differences in yourself and staff.
- **Honor your service.** Remind yourself (and others) of the important work you are doing. Recognize colleagues for their service whenever possible. Remind yourself that despite obstacles or frustrations, you are fulfilling a

noble calling—serving survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault! Recognize staff—either formally or informally—for their service.

- **Communicate constructively.** Communicate with staff clearly and in an optimistic manner. Identify mistakes or deficiencies in a constructive way and correct them. Compliment each other—compliments can be powerful motivators and stress moderators. Share your frustrations and your solutions.

**The importance of connecting is vital. It reminds us that we are all in this together.**

And please, don't forget about *hope*.

- This will end (even if it doesn't feel like it now).
- The vast majority of people *will* do well.
- We are strengthened by previous adversity. Call on that and each other's resilience.
- Look for, recognize, and amplify kindness and generosity.
- Find outlets for meaningful action.