



Practicing Emotion Regulation Under the Strain of COVID-19

Strategies for Frontline Workers

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Resolve Through Sharing. (2020). *Practicing emotion regulation under the strain of COVID-19: Strategies for frontline workers*. La Crosse, WI: Gundersen Lutheran Medical Foundation, Inc.

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Introduction

As COVID-19 continues to cause destruction and death across the country, the burden on those working as essential personnel is excessive. Hospital staff (e.g., nurses, housekeepers, physicians, chaplains, respiratory therapists, social workers) join community-based first responders (e.g., firefighters, police officers, paramedics) in facing uncertainty and risk during each shift. Shortages of equipment are well documented. Beds might fill as quickly as they empty. Patients can go from having mild or moderate symptoms to death in a matter of hours. Due to restrictive visiting policies, many patients are dying without their loved ones present, a situation that was rare to nonexistent prior to the current crisis. Some departments now have a drop in the number of those available to work, because staff members are increasingly infected by the virus. All this and more has taken a huge toll on frontline workers.

This stress and strain is felt across the country as part of regular news coverage (i.e., publications, networks, social media). In spite of all the press, you may wonder if those outside the arena of healthcare are truly aware. Do those who are not frontline workers understand the strain on first responders and healthcare professionals? Do those on the outside *feel with* those on the inside? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is “no” more often than is understandable.

What happens when those on the outside are unable to *feel with* those on the inside? Differences in values, goals, and expectations are amplified. From that, anger can burst into the open. This has been particularly noticeable of late when demonstrators have gone to the streets and places of government to protest the “safe at home” orders existing in many states and communities. Some oppose government orders that limit their ability to move about freely. They view this as an infringement on their personal liberties. Some believe that information on the deadliness of the virus is either exaggerated or untrue. They believe that economic health for the country must take precedence over the efforts of those who prioritize the physical health and the mortality of individuals. Opposition to the safety measures is fostered by conflicting information coming from those in positions of authority.

Demonstrators do not understand the level of sacrifice healthcare workers are making, the dangers they face, and the risk to their own families. As a result, frontline workers feel the protesters are betraying them. Added to these grievances are the challenges listed in the first paragraph that create fear, frustration, and helplessness. Yet all healthcare professionals expect themselves to practice at the highest level in spite of deficiencies and emotional trauma. The morale-boosting behavior of the general public, such as applause from apartment buildings at shift change, can seem a world apart from the public protests that frontline workers view as a “slap in the face.”

Anger and resentment hurt one’s well-being and cause suffering. Therefore, strategies for minimizing these emotions are vital to creating a positive work environment and personal peace. How in the world does one do that? We offer suggestions here that might work for you.

Focus on relationship, connection, and support

- Express gratitude to at least one colleague each shift who has demonstrated courage, helped you in a moment of need, or given something special to a patient. Maybe they've sat with you, comforted you, or supported you as you cared for a patient at the time of death.
- Identify a person (e.g., coworker, friend) who effectively practices emotion regulation to serve as a mentor. Tap into their expertise.
- Reflect on the connection those in your profession feel with you, even though they may be retired, work in different settings, or be half of a world away. Let the love from all these colleagues flow through you.
- Instead of thinking about those who do not understand, bring to mind those who have never done what you are doing but who appreciate what it takes to provide care in such challenging times. Most of these strangers, if not all, respect you and do not gather outside in protest.

Practice letting go

- Think about the knowledge and expertise you have that others don't. That in and of itself limits another's capacity to understand and empathize, and helps put their action into context.
- Focus on the process of letting go during your travel time to and from work. Whether you are walking, driving, or taking public transportation, picture the stress and strain floating away or dropping behind you.
- Enlist an interprofessional team member (e.g., chaplain, social worker, nurse) to help you with letting go of anger and resentment. They could bless your hands, provide words of inspiration, or offer encouragement.
- Letting go is not a magical process. Even working on doing so with all your heart may still leave residual resentment. Do your best. Hold in mind that your inner peace is heightened when you focus on the meaning and richness you are bringing to those you care for and work alongside.

Consider taking control

- You may believe it is not fair that you have to do all the work when others outside your professional circles have created the conflict. Rather than focusing on fairness or justice, you could tell yourself that you have the power and the opportunity to make things

better. That's a good first step. If you are a person of action, connecting with your local or state officials may allow you to feel more in control of your environment.

- Another way to take control is by limiting the amount of time you spend focusing on the protests (e.g., news, social media). Spending too much time in this activity can have a negative impact by increasing the intensity of your anger and resentment.

Incorporate ritual

- Work to make ritual a part of developing team camaraderie. A nurse at a busy hospital in New York City described shift change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Incoming staff form a circle and are anchored with a prayer offered by a teammate. Although this activity began spontaneously, it has become a regular practice, because it provides great comfort. Think about creating a meaningful moment at the time a patient who died is removed from their room. It could be as simple as bowing one's head and silently offering thanks for the patient's life.
- A ritual designed especially for releasing emotion is the "Dissolving Paper & Water" ritual described by Limbo and Kobler (2013). This would be something planned in advance when staff members have the time to participate. The person leading the ritual fills a clear bowl with water. Each person receives a small piece of dissolving paper (available for purchase online) and a pen. The leader states: "We invite you now to take up the piece of paper before you. . . . Think about something that has been difficult for you, something you wish to lay down, something you wish to change. Write down a few words or draw an image that represents what you are holding in mind" (p. 75). Each person comes forward, places their paper in the water, swirls it around, and watches it disappear. Once everyone has completed this step, the leader asks participants to reflect on the bowl that now contains the dissolved burdens. The going forth statement could include words about letting go, transformation, and a ritual of change.

Conclusion

We cannot predict the course of this pandemic over the next weeks and months. Similarly, we cannot predict how others will respond. Protesters support activities and actions that will take lives, add to the power of the tsunami hitting the healthcare system, and increase risk for all healthcare workers and first responders. It is unlikely that the protests will stop anytime soon and even less likely that the protesters will waive their right to healthcare if or when it becomes necessary. Making a decision to accept the protests as a different way of responding to stress, rather than viewing them as a personal affront, may be helpful. Spiritual and mental health professionals often encourage others to "accept what you cannot change." Take care of yourself by making a positive difference through your work. Who you are and what you have to give will outlast any message that says otherwise.

Dedication

Resolve Through Sharing has created this resource in honor of the many frontline workers around the world who, amidst the extreme conditions of the COVID-19 landscape, have committed to keeping their communities safe and healthy.

References

Limbo, R., & Kobler, K. (2013). *Meaningful moments: Ritual and reflection when a child dies*. La Crosse, WI: Gundersen Lutheran Medical Foundation, Inc.