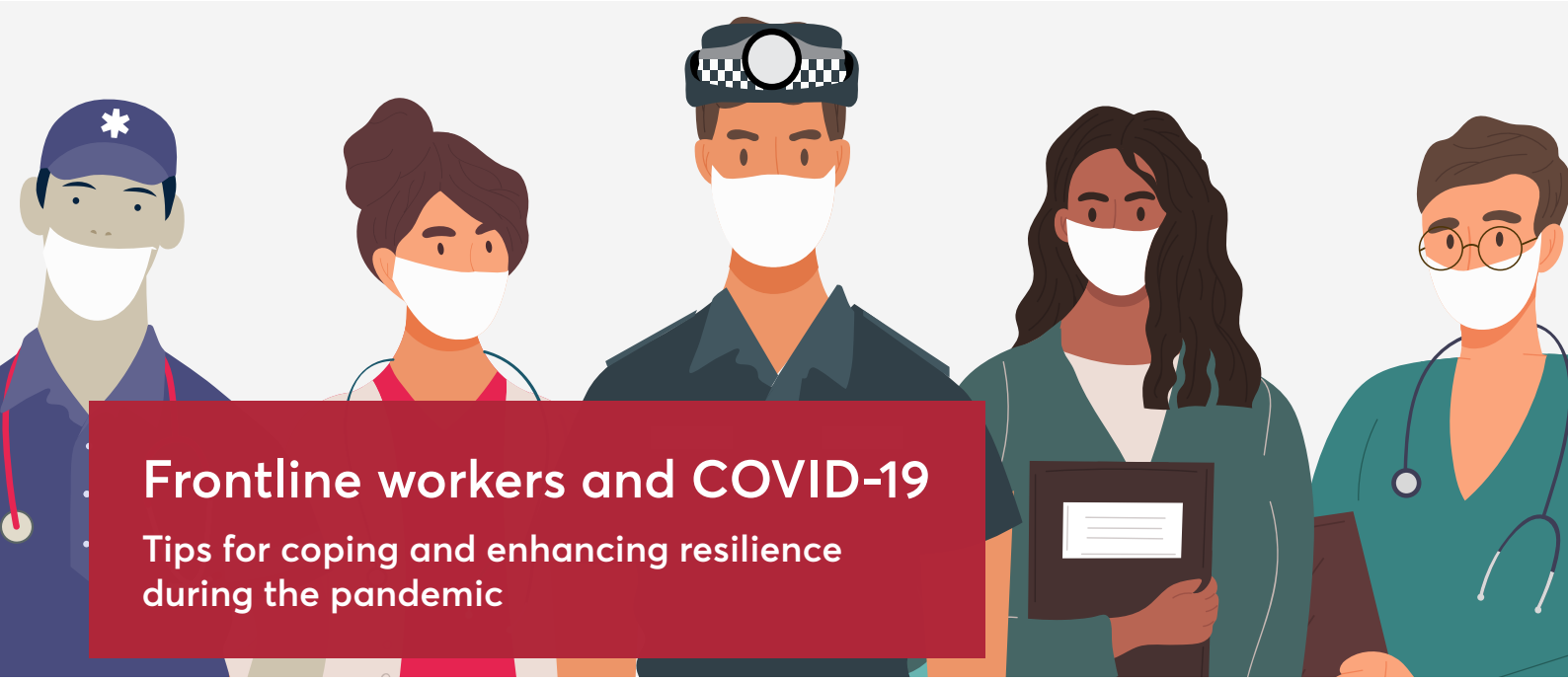

Frontline workers and COVID-19

Tips for coping and enhancing resilience during the pandemic

This information sheet can help frontline workers, such as police, healthcare and social support workers, to identify the specific challenges and stressors they are experiencing, what impact they may be having, and some useful reminders and strategies to minimise and cope with the distress caused by their role during the pandemic. Being aware of specific stressors and their impact will assist frontline workers to identify what action and coping strategies might be helpful.

The current stress experienced by frontline workers due to coronavirus (COVID-19) is likely to be heightened by the cumulative stress caused by many having worked through an extended period of drought, recent bushfires and floods.

Although known for resilience, frontline workers are at risk of suffering mental health issues because of the pandemic, both during and in the longer term, due to the range of challenges it presents.

Early research suggests high levels of symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia and psychological distress among frontline healthcare workers, indicating the need for workers and their organisations to make their health a priority.

Tips for boosting resilience

Increase your sense of control

Develop a routine and practices that will assist you to manage the challenges you face in your work – for example, healthy eating, regular sleep, keeping fit, engaging in enjoyable activities, maintaining contact with family and friends via digital channels.

Identify and problem-solve

Problem-solve to manage the circumstances that are causing you anxiety. For example, you may be concerned about some of the following issues:

- Transmitting the virus to those you live with. Find a solution that works for you to minimise the anxiety you experience – for example, shower and change before leaving work, shower on arriving at home and immediately place clothes in the

Stress

Stress is experienced when there is an imbalance between the internal or external demands being made on us and our resources to cope with those demands.

- Increase in engagement (increased emotional attachment or connection, overactive empathy, inability to disconnect from feelings)
- Emotions are overactive and difficult to control (increased emotional expression /outbursts, low frustration tolerance, out of character, emotional roller-coaster)
- The body is on alert, there is a sense of urgency and hyperactivity (increased heart rate, feeling overwhelmed, racing thoughts, overworking, feeling pressured)
- Loss of energy (fatigue, sleeping problems, physical complaints, lack of enthusiasm)

Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

- Under engagement or disengagement (decreased or low emotional attachment, reduced empathy, increased isolation and detachment, avoidance, increased cynicism and pessimism)
- Blunted emotions (emotional exhaustion, decreased emotional expression, numbness, flat affect)
- Sense of hopelessness and helplessness (physiological under arousal, reduced productivity, "what's the point?" thinking, feeling of apathy, disinterest)
- Loss of motivation (feelings of ineffectiveness or incompetence, reduced pleasure or enjoyment in the work)

washing machine, or as some frontline workers have done, consider living separately.

- Not being able to maintain contact with loved ones. Think creatively about developing ways this can be achieved. For example, make time to have a videoconference session with friends or family, do a crossword, read a story, play a game, or cook and/or share a meal together.
- Lack of adequate resources or support. Discuss your work problems with your team leader, manager and/or colleagues to work together to identify solutions. Sharing problems and working together to brainstorm solutions can be useful for problems such as a lack of resources or support, inadequate numbers of protective equipment, inappropriate organisational expectations, lack of relevant health and wellbeing policies and procedures, and moral dilemmas and difficult decisions due to lack of equipment/resources.

Engage in regular self-monitoring

This is crucial in recognising signs of stress as early as possible, identifying the contributing factors and developing a plan for addressing and managing them.

Watch for signs of burnout

Chronic work stress that is not successfully managed can result in burnout, and this may be likely due to the ongoing nature of the impacts of COVID-19. Understanding the differences and monitoring whether you are experiencing any symptoms of stress and/or burnout are important.

Strategies for coping

Experiencing personal stressors such as the increased responsibility of home schooling children, having an infected family member, and a lower household income can add to poorer mental health outcomes for healthcare workers.

Given frontline workers' central role in managing the pandemic, it is important to:

- limit exposure to watching, listening to, or reading news stories, and to make conscious decisions about when you want to expose yourself to such information.
- develop a balanced perspective of your current circumstances by acknowledging the challenges and your ideas for managing them as well as the positives.
- recognise the crucial role you are performing in dealing with this pandemic, and develop realistic expectations of how you can carry out your role, and what you can achieve given the necessary changes to the way you are working.
- realise the support and acknowledgement you are receiving from the community for the work you are doing on their behalf.

Community initiatives supporting frontline workers during COVID-19

There are many initiatives in Australia that highlight the public appreciation of the risks being taken by frontline workers and what they do to help us get through this pandemic.

Some of these include:

- A campaign of kindness called 'Adopt a healthcare worker' which offers help to healthcare workers who need assistance such as shopping, walking dogs, doing household chores and donating Airbnb properties so healthcare workers can self-isolate: bit.ly/3ez1qM1
- A fundraiser to supply hospital staff with free coffee, tea and snacks from local businesses: bit.ly/3h4JXwV
- An initiative to help health workers in Brisbane find babysitters, as well as other ways of supporting frontline workers in Brisbane: bit.ly/30fOiGy
- Letters for the Front, which asks Australians to send uplifting emails and cards to provide moral support to hospital staff: bit.ly/2CbEghO

Remember to seek help

Frontline workers are not always good at accessing mental health support. Please be prepared to reach out and seek help if you are worried about any of your reactions or signs of stress – for example, uncharacteristic bursts of anger or crying, significant changes in behaviour such as loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, difficulty sleeping, avoiding contact with family and friends, difficulty thinking clearly or solving problems, or feeling hopeless, or engaging in risky behaviours.

Use the counselling and support services offered through your organisation's Employee Assistance Scheme (EAP), or seek assistance from your GP to access professional counselling.

Tips for coping for frontline workers with pre-existing mental health or physical health issues

- If you are being treated for a mental or physical health condition, continue with your treatment, and talk to your provider if you experience new or worsening symptoms.
- Follow the formerly mentioned tips in this sheet that are relevant to your circumstance. Pay particular attention to those that relate to maintaining social contact and connectedness.
- Frontline workers who have to self-isolate or are immune suppressed and working from home, may experience stress or guilt in response to feeling that they are not contributing during the pandemic. Remind yourself that self-disclosing symptoms and isolating when mandated are important contributions. Looking after yourself is crucial in being able to maintain your health and stamina which will enable you to play your part in this COVID-19 marathon.
- If you are faced with an exacerbation of symptoms or develop new ones, it is important for you to access appropriate treatment so you can continue working at your optimum capacity. Making yourself a priority by booking an online or face-to-face session with a physiotherapist, for example, to address a muscular strain as a result of your increased work demands, or a psychologist to address new or existing issues you may be dealing with.

Tips for coping in states and territories where restrictions have eased

- Where COVID-19 cases are low or non-existent, there may be a temptation for frontline workers to think that as the pressure eases, their mental health will bounce back and be fine.
- Given the extended and high levels of stress experienced by frontline workers due to the demands and the unknowns of the virus, it is likely some will experience stress as they readjust to life after the virus, and with the possibility of the virus reoccurring.

- It may be useful for frontline workers to develop a plan to transition out of the crisis to the new normal to help them to readjust and reintegrate. This might include ongoing communication with colleagues to discuss work experiences, having more supervision, consultation or peer support, scheduling extended time off work, engaging in social support with friends and family, allowing time to process changes in values or worldview since the pandemic, and avoiding reliance on negative coping strategies such as alcohol and drugs.

Keep in mind

The impact of the pandemic on frontline workers' mental health is a major concern given how important it is for you as a frontline worker to maintain the best possible health, both physical and psychological, so that you can continue to provide essential services during this extended period of managing the impacts and restrictions of COVID-19. There are many resources and support programs available to help frontline workers during this time, and the following links provide access to some of these.

Useful resources

TEN – The Essential Network, a website and app providing resources and a help centre for health professionals experiencing mental health concerns

DRS4DRS: An independent program that provides confidential support to doctors and medical students across Australia.

RACGP GP Support Program: Free, confidential specialist advice to help GPs cope.

Nurse & Midwife Support: A 24/7 national support service for nurses and midwives that provides access to confidential advice and referral.

Beyond Blue: On the frontline: how healthcare workers can support themselves and each other.

This Way Up: A joint initiative between St Vincent's Hospital Sydney and UNSW, it is one of Australia's leading evidence-based online program providers for anxiety, depressive disorders and physical health.

Centre for Clinical Interventions: Guided and evidence-based self-help programs, including for developing self-compassion.

Financial information: Department of Treasury has some excellent information about the economic stimulus to support business Support for Businesses and the Coronvirus Business Liaison Unit. Additionally the ATO has information including about the JobKeeper program.

National Coronavirus Helpline: Call this line for information on COVID-19 or help with the COVIDSafe app. The line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.

Visit psychology.org.au for more.

Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you and your family are experiencing as a result of self-isolation is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including stress. A psychologist can help you manage your stress and anxiety using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist.
You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.
- Investigate other mental health services, including domestic violence services via the link: https://mhaustralia.org/need-help

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