



Guidance for IPEM Members – Protecting your Mental Health during the pandemic

COVID-19 is an unprecedented public health emergency. We are facing unfamiliar stresses and worries about the safety and wellbeing of our friends, families, colleagues and communities. You may experience unfamiliar emotions of sadness, anger, frustration, even depression, without spotting them or connecting them to the current Covid-19 pandemic. You might just not feel yourself. You might see unusual emotional reactions in others which they may not be aware of or associate with Covid-19 either.

To put this in context, healthcare professionals who routinely work in the front line of acute and traumatic patient care are more used to a culture where emotional reactions to difficult situations are discussed and individuals keep an eye out for each other. This kind of culture is not routinely found in medical physics and clinical engineering departments, where emotional pressures tend to be lower. During the COVID-19 emergency, we may well find ourselves in unfamiliar and highly stressful situations.

There is no shame at all in acknowledging that you find a stressful situation difficult, demanding and even emotional. Asking for and receiving support from others is a necessary part of being an effective and compassionate healthcare professional. Managing our mental health and well-being is as important as managing our physical health.

This briefing note offers some things to consider for yourself and those around you, and provides information, advice and support resources you or others may find useful.

1. Knowing what to look for

Being aware of the signs of stress and anxiety in yourself and others will help you to identify where problems might be developing. Stress is your body's way of responding to threats and managing pressure. Excess stress can affect your moods and have an impact on how you relate to others. It can make you feel anxious and irritable and affect your self-esteem.

Anxiety is an intense feeling of unease or fear, sometimes accompanied by an increased heart rate, shaking or sweating. It can cause exaggeration of problems and magnify risks and worries out of proportion. The earlier that you can identify and act on these signs to help yourself and your colleagues, the better.

Get help with anxiety, fear or panic – NHS:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/understanding-panic/>

Get help with low mood, sadness or depression – NHS:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/low-mood-and-depression/>

2. Coping

The NHS provide some basic ideas for managing stress, anxiety and other possible effects of mental health issues: <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>. Individual hospitals may also

provide additional resources and extra support for individuals whose work puts them particularly at risk.

Many of us have experienced stress and anxiety in the past and might have experience of coping strategies. If so, what has worked before may work now. If you have not experienced stress and anxiety, good coping strategies could include trying to build elements of the following into your life as regularly as possible:

- Rest and respite.
- Healthy food.
- Physical activity.
- Staying in contact with family and friends.
- Mindfulness.

Overusing alcohol, tobacco or other drugs in a coping strategy is best avoided, as they could lead to worsening mental health issues. Being open and sharing ideas in a kind and supportive way can also be helpful to colleagues.

3. Leading

If you are a leader or manager, consider the state of mind of those who report to you as well as your own mental health. Be alert to any changes in behaviour, signs of stress and anxiety in your team. Make time to listen carefully to problems of your team with empathy. Communication can be both verbal and non-verbal. Here are some other ideas for leadership strategies:

- Communicate clearly, concisely and with information that you know is accurate.
- Rotate staff as frequently as possible to avoid burn out, not just on/off, but between roles if some have higher stress levels than others.
- Create a partner system to provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety procedures.
- Make sure people take regular breaks and rest away from the working environment.
- Recognise the challenges that staff may be experiencing outside the workplace and be as flexible as possible.
- Signpost support and help for staff experiencing mental health issues.
- Be a role model – be open about your own problems and share your coping strategies.

4. Seeking help

We all experience times when getting help is the right thing to do. If you are working in an acute patient environment, it is likely that emotional and mental support will be in place for you, for example through identified leads or structured events to share experiences. The earlier you identify the signs of emotional stress in yourself, the sooner you will be able to act and help not only yourself but also others around you.

The NHS provides a list of places where you can access support if you are struggling with mental health issues: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>

5. Resources

A number of mental health apps have been made free of charge to NHS Employees in the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, including:

Unmind: nhs.unmind.com/signup – tracks and assesses mental health and well being

Headspace: headspace.com/nhs – mindfulness

Sleepio: onboarding.sleepio.com – sleep tracking

Daylight: onboarding.trydaylight.com – understanding anxiety

The NHS has an app library for mental health resources:
<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

According to studies, disasters have phases, in which human reactions to the situation change. For more information, visit: <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/recovering-disasters/phases-disaster>