

Supporting Patients' Mental Wellness During COVID-19: Advice for Health Care Professionals

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health care providers are likely to encounter patients who are dealing with various levels of emotional distress about the pandemic, including its impact on themselves, family and community members. Supporting patients' mental well-being using effective communication strategies will be important during these times of uncertainty. Here are some tips to consider:

Stay informed – Regularly check NSHA's information on Covid-19 for the latest information:

- Staff Intranet: <http://intra.nshealth.ca/SitePages/coronavirus-update.aspx>
- For physicians: <https://www.cdha.nshealth.ca/coronavirus>

Educate and correct misinformation – Health Care Providers are in a position to influence behaviours in the protection and spread of this virus, including reinforcing good hand hygiene and the current provincial, national and international guidelines. With easy access to social media, it is important to direct patients to accurate scientific information. The following sites are good references:

- Government of Nova Scotia - <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/>
- Government of Canada - www.canada.ca/coronavirus or call 1-833-784-4397
- World Health Organization - www.who.int/health-topics

Anticipate and counsel about stress reactions and positive coping strategies:

- Acknowledge that it is normal to experience feelings of distress during these times.
- Help patients to recognize the signs of distress including worry, fear, insomnia, increasing use of alcohol or illicit drugs, interpersonal problems so they are more aware of their mental health and prevent further problems before they become unmanageable.
- Educate patients about the stress response – as stress goes up, self-care often goes down.
- Discuss and explore the benefits of stress management techniques including:
 - i. Physical activity: *walking, biking, exercise*
 - ii. Physical or mental calming: *being in nature, yoga, mindfulness, practicing spirituality and relaxation*
 - iii. Emotional expression: *journaling, art work, writing, creating*
 - iv. Social connection: *reaching out to friends and family, using technology creatively to connect*
 - v. Connecting people to resources to support self-management and wellness (*see examples below*)

The following are tips that all health care providers can use when having conversations with their patients:

Ask, Listen, Summarize, Invite – This is a way of communicating with patients that supports a trusting, patient-centered relationship:

- **Ask** – Gather information from the patient related to their context; seek information in open ended-questions: “Tell me about how you are feeling? What’s scary about this?”
- **Listen** – This is about hearing what the patient is saying or not saying. If you are talking more than the patient, you are likely not listening!
- **Summarize** – Putting it all together. Presenting “I said, you said” back to the patient. For example, “What I heard you say...” or “It sounds like you...”
- **Invite** – Asking the patient if they would like to hear your thoughts, knowledge or opinion on the topic at hand. “What I heard you say is... given this, are you willing to talk about...?” If the patient says yes, this is a chance to

References:

1. https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Caring_for_Patients_Mental_WellBeing_during_Coronavirus.pdf
2. <https://motivationalinterviewing.org/>

provide recommendations and link them to supports and resources. For example, this may be an opportunity to dispel myths and provide accurate information related to COVID-19, or link them with resources to self-manage and cope with emotional distress.

Motivational Communications Strategies – These basic strategies are useful in helping facilitate health behavior change:

- **Nonjudgmental Curiosity** – A willingness to understand a person’s behaviour through the lens of their own experience (“why do you do what you do?”) without a value judgment (behaviour is neither right nor wrong – it just is).
- **Sitting with Ambivalence** – Understanding that patients will experience opposite feelings, intentions, and opinions at the same time. A behavior can be good and bad. Help people to focus on what is important to them and tip the balance in favour of changing.
- **Expressing Empathy** – Trying to understand the patient’s point of view; feeling “with” your patient, even if you disagree with it. It is a recognition and validation of a patient’s fear, anxiety and worry and a key component in developing a trusting patient-provider relationship.

REMINDER for yourself and your patients:

Limit media exposure – Research has shown that excess media exposure to stressful events can contribute to negative mental health outcomes. This applies to health care providers, as well as the people we serve. Get the information from trusted sources and then take a break and encourage others to do so too.

Take care of yourself and loved ones – Health care providers are not immune to experiencing their own emotional distress, and this can be compounded by caring for others. Make sure basic needs are met: healthy eating, physical activity, sleeping, and self-care, to name a few. Be aware of resources available to you, including supports through NSHA’s Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP) and Occupational Health.

Virtual resources to support patients’ mental health and wellness:

MindWell U - Available across Nova Scotia, Mindwell U is a free online program that takes just five minutes a day, and can be accessed anywhere and on any device. This self-guided program challenges you to take five minutes out of your day to learn the basics in mindfulness: <https://app.mindwellu.com/novascotia>

ICAN (Conquer Anxiety and Nervousness) – Offered through the Strongest Families Institute, ICAN is an anxiety program for those 18 and older, supporting clients over the phone and internet free of charge. People can self-refer to the program. <https://login.strongestfamilies.com/folder/1963/>

TAO (Therapy Assistance Online) – An online library of engaging, interactive programs to learn life skills and to help people bounce back from disappointments or stumbling blocks in life. https://taoconnect.org/what_is_tao/ns

NSHA Employee & Family Assistance Program - For patients who are NSHA employees, Morneau Shepell provides immediate and confidential assistance for any work, health or life concern for both employees and their families who reside together. Call 1-800-461-5558, or visit <https://www.workhealthlife.com>

Mental Health and Addictions Intake Line - call toll-free 1-855-922-1212

Mental Health Crisis Line - call toll-free (24/7) 1-888-429-8167

Health Authority Websites:

- **NSHA Mental Health and Addictions** - www.nshealth.ca/mental-health-addictions
- **IWK Mental Health and Addictions** - www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health
- **NSHA COVID-19 resources page** - www.nshealth.ca/coronavirus-home/coronavirus-covid-19-resources
- **NSHA Library Services patient education website** - Reliable, current health information that is easy to read and understand, including information healthy eating, physical activity, emotional wellness, apps, podcasts and videos - <https://library.nshealth.ca/PatientEducation>