



## **CARING FOR PATIENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A GUIDE FOR PHYSICIANS**

During COVID-19 pandemic, physicians are likely to encounter patients who are experiencing various levels of emotional distress about the risk of infection and its impact on them, their families, and their communities.

Physicians should acknowledge this uncertainty and help patients understand the emotional component to their potential health concerns. In addition, physicians may follow the following recommendations to help promote patients' mental well-being:

- **Stay informed and updated.**

Obtain the latest, credible information from authentic public health resources, such as the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, World Health Organization or Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in order to provide accurate, factual information to your patients.

- **Impart education to patients**

Physicians are on the front lines of medical care and are in a position to directly influence patient behaviours. Patient education regarding various key aspects of the COVID-19 infection may play a critical role in disease control as well as reduction of emotional distress. Patient education can include education about basic hygiene such as hand-washing, cough etiquette, social distancing and staying at home to discussions on prevention or early detection. Having proper education empowers the patients to make right decisions which go a long way to protect the families and communities.

- **Correct misconceptions.**

In this digitally connected era with a variety of social media platforms, misinformation and rumours can spread quickly, causing unnecessary panic. If patients share any inaccurate information related to the pandemic, correct their myths or misconceptions and advise them to visit reliable public health resources to gather information.

- **Limit excessive exposure to media platforms.**

Try to have a limited time set aside to check for news or updates pertaining to the pandemic. Constant, inflowing stream of information every few seconds or minutes is likely to result in emotional distress and undue anxieties. Use only certain trusted media sources to update yourself twice a day. Counsel your patients to avoid excessive exposure to news channels and social media updates.

- **Counsel about stress management.**

- Some degree of stress is common in the context of uncertain situations and health risks. To begin with, help your patients to normalize their anxieties ("Many of us are feeling stressed right now. It is understandable that you are stressed.")
- Teach patients to recognize the signs or indicators of emotional distress, such as insomnia, concentration problems, bodily symptoms, increased use of alcohol or tobacco etc. This will help them become more aware of their mental state.
- Discuss strategies to deal with emotional distress and to alleviate health-related anxieties, which can include anticipation and preparation, rehearsing the everyday preventive measures, maintaining a healthy lifestyle with proper diet, light exercise or meditation.
- Encourage development of new hobbies and activities to cope with social isolation

- **Refer for specialized mental health care**

If a patient is found to have severe emotional issues or suspected exacerbation of pre-existing psychiatric illness, it is better to refer to a specialist for further advice.

- **Take care of yourself and your family**

Physicians themselves are vulnerable to emotional distress during pandemics, which can be exacerbated by their own risk of acquiring infection while providing care to possibly exposed or suspected patients and/or passing the infection to their family members. It is important that physicians must take the necessary measures to ensure their own mental health and wellbeing (e.g. eating or sleeping adequately, taking breaks etc). Physicians must plan ahead for the possibility that they may need to be quarantined after a possible exposure

**References:**

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). <https://www.cdc.gov/>
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. <https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response>