Practitioner tips

Phoenix
AUSTRALIA

Caring for patients' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and other infectious disease outbreaks

With all the uncertainty around the COVID-19 pandemic, health practitioners are likely to encounter patients who are experiencing various levels of emotional distress about the outbreak and its impact on them, their families, and their communities.

Practitioners should acknowledge uncertainty about diseases and help patients understand that there is often an emotional component to potential health concerns. In addition, practitioners should consider the following recommendations for promoting patients' mental wellbeing during infectious disease outbreaks.

Promoting mental wellbeing

Stay informed

Obtain the latest information about the outbreak from credible public health resources, such as the Department of Health, in order to provide accurate information to your patients.

Educate

Patient education plays a critical role in containing the disease and mitigating emotional distress during outbreaks. Depending on the nature of the outbreak, this can range from education about basic hygiene such as handwashing and cough etiquette to more complex medical recommendations for prevention, diagnosis, and treatment.

Correct misinformation

In this age of social media, misinformation can spread quickly and easily, causing unnecessary alarm. If patients present you with inaccurate information related to the outbreak, correct their misconceptions and direct them to credible public health resources.

Limit media exposure

Today's 24-hour news cycle can make it difficult to turn away from the TV, radio, or news feed, but research has shown that excess media exposure to coverage of stressful events can result in negative mental health outcomes. Use trusted media outlets to gather the information you need, then turn them off—and advise your patients to do the same.

Anticipate and counsel about stress reactions

Emotional distress is common in the context of uncertain and potentially life-threatening situations, such as infectious disease outbreaks.

- A good first step for mitigating your patient's stress is to acknowledge that it exists and help normalise it by saying, "I see that you're stressed, that's understandable. Many people are feeling this way right now."

- Teach patients to recognise the signs of distress, including worry, fear, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, interpersonal problems, avoiding certain situations at work or in daily living, unexplained physical symptoms, and increased use of alcohol or tobacco. This will help them become more aware of the state of their mental health and deal with their distress before it becomes harder to manage.
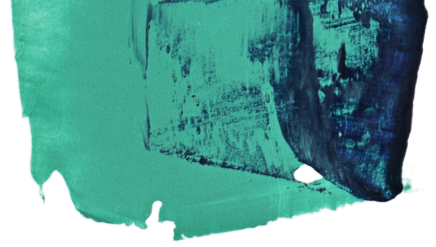
- Recommend that patients stay connected with friends and family. Some patients will need to be self-isolate or be quarantined, which can add to fear and stress. It's important they continue to stay connected with loved ones, even if it's over the phone or via social media.

- Discuss strategies to reduce distress, which can include:

  a. taking everyday preventive measures (e.g., frequent handwashing)

  b. maintaining a healthy diet, exercise and sleep regime

  c. talking to loved ones about worries and concerns

  d. engaging in hobbies and enjoyable activities

  e. being prepared (e.g., developing a personal/family preparedness plan for the outbreak).

- If a patient is experiencing severe emotional distress or has mental health issues, refer for specialised mental health care.

Health practitioners are not invulnerable to experiencing their own emotional distress during infectious disease outbreaks, and this distress can be compounded by caring for sick and distressed patients.

Make sure your basic needs are met, including: maintaining a healthy diet, staying hydrated, and allowing enough time for sleep; taking a break when you need one; checking in with loved ones; practising the strategies to reduce distress listed above; and monitoring yourself for stress reactions.

Mental health resources and referral services

Lifeline
24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention
13 11 14

Beyond Blue
Depression, suicide, anxiety and other related mental disorders
1300 224 636

Emerging Minds
Programs and resources for children and their families

MindSpot
Online assessment and treatment for anxiety and depression

Headspace
Mental health support to 12-25 year olds

Red Cross
Useful disaster emergency management resources

Australian Psychological Society
Search for private practice psychologists

Head to Health
Links to trusted Australian online and phone supports, resources and treatment options

1800 Respect
National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service

Phoenix Australia
Information for people affected by trauma, their families and friends

For more COVID-19 related resources visit **www.phoenixaustralia.org/covid-19**

Adapted with permission from the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Uniformed Services University.