



MedStar Health

MedStar Health Nursing.

COVID-19. Caring for you.

Mental PPE

MedStar Health is the system it is because of its people, and your health and safety is a primary concern during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following FAQ by Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, MD, chair of the department of psychiatry at MedStar Medical Group, is designed to help you build “mental PPE” – mental and emotional tactics for resilience during this pandemic response.

I am scared of getting this virus. As a caregiver, how do I get past that to provide care?

Everybody is scared of coronavirus – for themselves, for their family, for their elderly parents or children, for their community. The answer is not an easy one, because no one can say “You’ll be fine!” What gets me through these times is knowing that taking care of ill patients is what I was trained to do. Yes, I must be careful. Concentrating on doing your job as health care professionals helps move your focus away from the fear.

This virus came upon us so quickly. I’ve had a hard time adjusting. Are there any tips on adapting?

We are all anxious. This is very common when you have a pandemic, when you don’t know what will happen. We’ve seen it before, with HIV and AIDS, with SARS, with anthrax after 9/11. Until we have a cure or a vaccine, we’re all adjusting as we go. In the meantime, our mental PPE consists of ways to manage anxiety. One way is to focus on things we can control. Limit exposure to news, on your phone or the internet. Give yourself 20 minutes a day then move on to something else.

This virus is particularly hard because so many patients are really sick or dying. How do I manage my sadness?

It is totally understandable to feel grief and depression when you are helping persons at end of life, even when there’s no pandemic. Allow yourself to experience this. We are going to have sadness and probably the feeling that we couldn’t save people. We can’t save everyone. As a psychiatrist, I lose patients to suicide. The protective factors are the things you can do to take care of yourself. Sleep. Exercise. Do things for each other. If the sadness becomes overwhelming, please do contact Employee Assistance or Behavioral Health Services.

COVID is changing the way I treat patients – much more PPE, much less contact. It doesn’t feel right.

It is true that we have less contact with patients. Most of us are very relieved about this, given this disease. We have had to adjust to the realities of this disease. It’s great that we have things like iPads and Telehealth that we didn’t have 10 years ago, because they are helping with our patient care. It is disconcerting right now, but as we all adjust it may prove we incorporate these tools more.

How do I handle all this?

I’ve been speaking to groups on units, and I encourage caregivers to help each other. Acts of kindness go a long way to creating the bonding within your workplace environment that is so helpful. Share what you are experiencing with each other. Be willing to receive acts of kindness – when a colleague asks how you’re doing, tell them if it’s a hard day. Social connections help. So does philanthropy. Helping others, like bringing something for the food pantry, can feel very good.

Mental PPE

Protecting your mental and emotional health can help you get through a crisis with your spirits and energy intact. Here's a list of "Mental PPE" from Dr. Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, chair of the department of psychiatry at MedStar Medical Group.



Taking a break from covid.

The news is everywhere. Plus you live COVID-19 at work. It can be overwhelming.

- Limit the amount of time you watch/listen to the news.
- Let others know you want to talk about something other than COVID-19.
- Read, watch entertaining movies, play games, distract with hobbies you enjoy.



Sleep.

Always important. Vital when you are under stress.

- Try to get 7-8 hours.
- Use meditation or other relaxation strategy to clear your mind before bed.



Exercise.

Helps with sleep. Increases endorphins. Can increase endurance & energy.

- Walking is exercise. So is gardening.
- Even 20 minutes helps.
- Schedule a few times per week devoted to movement outside of work.



Connecting with others.

Social support networks are protective and healing. So is helping others.

- Use technology to continue connecting to the social networks you enjoy.
- Support a food bank, give to a philanthropy, develop a community garden.
- Discover new local communities/shared interest groups online.



Allowing others to connect with you.

Everyone wants to help. However maybe you don't want more cookies or another Zoom date.

- Suggest they write you a note, card or e-mail.
- Post a picture on social media and tell friends you love reading their comments.
- Have friends suggest their best strategies for taking a break from COVID. Join them (from a distance).