



The Tavistock and Portman

NHS Foundation Trust

COVID-19 - Guidance for the Support and Wellbeing of Adult Social Workers and Social Care Professionals in a Pandemic Crisis

On 12th March 2020, the World Health Organisation (2020) declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a global pandemic. Less than 2 weeks later in the UK, the Prime Minister announced strict lock down measures across the country. We have since seen a rapid increase in self-isolation and social distancing, with the risk of infection to vulnerable groups of people rising by the day. As the pandemic continues and with the peak of infection still thought to be reached within the UK, adult social care continues to respond effectively to provide care and support where needed.

However, a national emergency on this scale has not been encountered in the UK, within most people's life time, and as the pandemic escalates and staff become more physically and mentally exhausted, there may be a number of staff who require additional support because the situation has become overwhelming for them (CoP, 2020). A study on Chinese healthcare workers identified that those exposed to COVID-19 cases were at 'high risk' for developing symptoms of anxiety, depression and distress, and those with pre-existing mental health conditions are likely to experience elevated symptoms (Lai et al, 2020). This places a duty of care of the employers of adult social care staff to recognise and attend to these risks to the workforce.

This guidance is aimed at all social care practitioners and their managers who are responsible for providing services to adults in the community. It draws on and acknowledges approaches to thinking about and working with organisational challenges informed by understanding the impact of emotions and the unconscious on individual and organisational responses to those challenges (Obholzer and Roberts, 2019). It situates the current challenge for health and social care in the context of understanding the centrality of relationships in this work and the operation of individual and organisational defences (Armstrong and Rustin, 2014; Ruch et al., 2018) drawing from psychoanalytic, systems and attachment theories. It therefore addresses some of the emotional, psychological and psycho-social factors brought about by the global pandemic. The impact of this is acknowledged and a range of recommendations for managers and staff are made.

Personal and Professional Impact of COVID-19 on for Adult Social Care Professionals

On a personal level, our basic needs, such as safety, security, income and social contact, have been threatened and disrupted, rendering many of us feeling helpless, fearful and anxious. With many social care workers being named as key workers, this has challenged the workforce to respond rapidly to additional levels of social and health care needs, whilst maintaining ongoing services to vulnerable adults in the community. Those in social work and social care roles will be drawing on the remarkable pools of resource and resilience, required of them, in order to cope with an unprecedented proximity to illness and uncertainty. In parallel with this, many will also be navigating the needs of their own families, such as meeting the education needs of their children at home and ensuring that vulnerable relatives are supported.

Supporting people who are in vulnerable COVID-19 groups can present us with additional challenges. These may include feelings of responsibility such as when people are discharged from hospitals to nursing or residential care (particularly under the Coronavirus Hospital Discharge arrangements) and may face increased risk to their welfare. This may be because of concerns about unmanaged social distancing or inadequate personal protective equipment. A further impact of this direct work is that social care professionals themselves will be at increased risk of contracting COVID-19, as well as the emotional impact of being close to death and bereavement.

In crises like this, the usual ways that people project emotions can be more intense and we can also be on the receiving end of these from wider society, our service users and our colleagues. This can be both positive and negative for example, health and social care workers may be either idealised, where we are unconsciously invited to become heros, or we are demonised; we can't get it right and we aren't doing enough. The same processes can also happen within teams and organisations. Understanding what might be going on below the surface can help us to understand ourselves and our responses, so we can better navigate some of the turbulence (Halton, 2019). In such a climate, a substantial degree of care and sensitivity is required of any attempt to navigate through the potential psychological, emotional and psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Potential Reactions to a Pandemic

Each individual will respond differently to experiencing an unprecedented event such as a pandemic. However, anyone who is directly or indirectly exposed to such an incident is highly likely to experience some distress at some point, particularly given the sheer numbers of patients who will present as critically unwell,

Typical reactions in the short term might include:

Emotional Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling numb/cold, stunned immediately after the incident • Fearfulness • Distress • Helplessness
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt – at wanting to help but can't because self-isolating; at the death of someone being supported, at surviving where others haven't; that they 'should' have been able to help; at discharging people to potentially unsafe care • Hopelessness • Anger • Anxiety • Stress • Sense of dread
Social Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social withdrawal • Avoiding work – including sickness absence, arriving late, or disengaging from meetings • Interpersonal conflict • Unable to engage relationally as usually would • Difficulties in navigating multi-disciplinary contexts or finding authority within these settings due to a change in priorities
Psycho-Social Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers feeling the impact of others' anxiety on themselves • Compassion fatigue – feeling exhausted through showing empathy, care and compassion for others • Vicarious trauma – feeling the effects of the trauma of others, transferred onto yourself • Feeling responsible for the pressures within the wider system and for resolving these
Cognitive Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced concentration • Forgetfulness • Confusion • Reduced confidence in self or others • Hypervigilance – always on alert, scanning in the environment, constantly watching the news/media sources for information about the pandemic • Thoughts in the mind that are intrusive • Denial that the situation is occurring • Indecisiveness
Physical Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • Exhaustion and lethargy • Difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep • Hyper-arousal • Reduced appetite, nausea, gastro-intestinal symptoms • Heart racing or pounding/ feeling of pain in chest/ chest tightness • Sweaty hands • Night sweats • Pale

Behavioural Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social withdrawal from colleagues, managers, friends and/or family • Behaviours which you notice are out of character for that person • Irritable • Crying or tearful • Increased use of alcohol, illicit drugs, cigarettes, prescription drugs • Reduction in self-care (such as untidy, dishevelled) or • Heightened self-care such as excessive showering, disinfecting • Increase in minor accidents/ risk taking • Restlessness
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Table adapted from College of Paramedics (CoP,2020)

The Need for Psychosocial Support for the Emotional Wellbeing of Employees During and After a Pandemic

At this unprecedented time, it is hard to compute what we are processing. It is a new experience, for which we have no internal working model. We are all faced with the challenge of navigating how to look after ourselves and others in the face of something which is far too big for us to manage. Initially, all we can do consciously (or perhaps unconsciously), is draw on other catastrophic events or crises that have created uncertainty, fear and loss for us in the past. In fact, some are likening it to war or other global crises. Whether a conscious experience or not, both render us feeling 'out of control'. We may find it hard to express our fears or accept our very deep feelings of uncertainty around impending loss and the unsettled reality of not knowing when the end might be or how this is likely to manifest as a 'new future' which currently is quite unimaginable.

The trauma of having experienced a global disaster such as a pandemic will challenge the beliefs that we hold about ourselves, those close to us, and the world we live in, including our work and the values we associate with it (CoP, 2020). A longer-term view will be especially important when thinking about social work and social care workers. Psychological reactions are likely to present both during and after the event in staff who may be at work, self-isolating or unwell, and will be expressed through emotional, relational, cognitive, social, behavioural and physical means (Williams et al, 2014).

Psychosocial support is important because it enables us to step-in and support the individual in seeing how the incident is shaping their life and perhaps to see things from a different perspective, process what has happened, mediate strong emotions, help them to rebuild their beliefs and to cope with the situation so that they may function effectively again (CoP, 2020). It can also help individuals to establish for themselves, a sense of agency and an element of control, which can help them to feel contained in the midst of uncertainty. Ruch here?

What Can Managers do to Support the Wellbeing of Social Care Professionals?

During a pandemic, it is likely that staff and managers will feel scared and fearful given the risk and uncertainty of the situation. A psychosocial approach to supporting staff was advocated by the Department of Health (2009) and complements the duty of care towards protecting the mental health and wellbeing of your workforce. Keeping staff mental wellbeing continually at the forefront during a pandemic is paramount to enhance personal resilience, so that individuals and groups have better capacity to undertake their roles (World Health Organisation, 2020). These are a range of things which managers can do to support the wellbeing of social care professionals:

- **Be Visible** – many of the workforce will be working remotely, whilst self-isolating and it is important that managers remain visible and make sustained attempts to achieve this through virtual platforms, in order to maintain daily contact with their teams.
- **Be Available** – it is important that social care professionals know how to contact their own line manager or who to contact in their absence and that this person is available and will respond in a reasonable timeframe. It is helpful for manager to consider what is realistic and discuss this with their teams, so that everyone knows what to expect and what the plan is. This in itself can feel containing.
- **Check on Basic Needs** - Consider if individual staff members' basic needs are being met – are they getting enough sleep? How might you notice work-related fatigue? Are they paying attention to their food and water intake? How much essential contact are they having with their friends and family? Be mindful of other life challenges that may be affecting individuals – financial, domestic violence, childcare issues, elderly parents or partners with co-morbidities who may be at high risk of contracting the disease or who are unwell.
- **Promote Coping Strategies** - Educate to improve resilience in the immediate and short-term – for example; provide guidance on the possible psychological impact and coping strategies. Encourage individuals to recognise and use their coping strategies - ask them what coping strategies they use when they are feeling stressed (Williams et al, 2020). Be mindful of your limitations and when and how to signpost staff to specific services such as counselling or employee support services.
- **Promote Self-Care** – Actively ask staff to share what they are doing to attend to their self-care needs and maintaining a good balance, this might be exercise or other activities such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness, art or crafting, starting a garden project or listening to music.
- **Model Empathy, Compassion and Kindness** – when people are working in pressurised conditions, the risk is that they may become less compassionate and empathic. It is important to be able to notice in yourself and others when this may be a risk and take action to demonstrate small acts of kindness. Amongst the crisis, it is even more important to remember to give encouragement and positive feedback to staff.
- **Increase Supervision Opportunities** – good supervision is more important now, than ever before, as issues such as managing risk and making decisions become more complex and challenging. The role that supervision plays in providing emotional

support and containment for staff is essential at this time and they would benefit from shorter and more frequent opportunities for 1-1 conversation, with prioritisation given to space for them to express their feelings and for you as the manager to listen.

- **Promote Connectedness** - Share with your team that this is a 'group human experience and not one we are going through alone' – this is important for promoting social connectedness and for lessening feelings of distress, anxiousness and isolation. You could consider having a team 'check in' for 10 minutes each morning, in order to keep in touch and for everyone to share what they have planned for the day.
- **Promote Learning** – the current pandemic will no doubt create learning for us all, particularly related to decisions and cases linked to COVID-19. Consider setting up peer support network groups for staff and for managers which draw upon expertise from those with professional mental health or pastoral experience. These could be virtually via safe social media or video conferencing platforms for example.
- **Mental Health Awareness** - For those with a pre-existing mental health condition, this may be exacerbated and heighten any emotions, anxieties or compulsive behaviours (WHO, 2019). Social isolation and physical distancing measures may well impact upon usual support systems and can intensify a person's sense of vulnerability. Ensure that you demonstrate your awareness of these factors and make a point of asking staff about their mental health.
- **Share Information** – there is a lot of information circulating about the pandemic and the global impact of this. Whilst you cannot control what people read or access, it is important that reliable and up to date information, relevant to your service area, is shared regularly with staff. This will provide containment and ensure that they are informed.
- **Containing the Container** – for managers directly supporting social care staff, it is particularly important that you think about your own emotional needs and what you need to support and maintain your own wellbeing at this time. Take care of yourself. Be honest and compassionate with yourself in how you are feeling (Williams et al, 2020). During a significant incident, it can feel overwhelming and exhausting (NATO, 2008). Despite wanting to be there for your team, recognise that all good leaders need to have a break and get some rest. Have others relieve and support you. This also models good selfcare to your team and psychologically permits them to rest when stood down too. Consider what your manager may be able to provide from this list and refer to the next section in terms of what you can do to support yourself.

What Can Social Care Professionals do to Support Themselves?

- **Be realistic!** - much of our thoughts are on our own personal lives and that of loved ones and we need to prioritise the basic needs of our families and vulnerable family members in particular. It is important to factor this in and consider how much emotional labour we can do outside of this, particularly if family members are unwell with COVID-19. We need to be realistic about our working practices and how these

will need to change, particularly when working remotely all day. Talk to your manager about your own particular needs at this time.

- **Adjusting to Home Working: Routine and Boundaries** - for many of us the pandemic has meant more working at home and this has understandably required adjustments for most social care staff, particularly those sharing home working spaces with partners and home educating their children. It is therefore particularly important to establish a realistic routine and boundaries around working and stick to this. This may be different from the usual 9-5 routine and may require you to agree a different routine with your employer. This will enable you to practice self-regulation and containment.
- **Beware of the Tendency to 'Panic Work'** - As many of us adjust to the crisis brought about by the pandemic, there is a risk that we might over-work or not recognise the new boundaries of our capacity, under the changing circumstances. It may be important to re-establish our own understanding of work priorities and what may have once been a priority might need to change – it will be important to review these priorities with your manager so that you can develop your confidence in decisions such as risk assessment.
- **Keeping Connected: Checking in and out** - It is important when working remotely to keep connected with peers and supervisors. Consciously write an 'ally-ship strategy'. Take a moment to think about which colleagues are your consistent support network and whether you can you plan a 10 minute check in with someone and the beginning of the day, to say what you hope to achieve in terms of work and self-care and someone at the end of the day to 'sign out' with. This can help to pace yourself and keep a check on your own wellbeing and is another way for finding emotional containment in a moving emotional landscape.
- **Relationships Require Attention** - the rise in worry, anxiety and stress, nationally and globally, can put strain on relationships, both personally and professionally. It is important, now more than ever, that the notion of relationship-based approaches to practice are at the fore of our thinking and that we continue to be self-aware in terms of our internal responses to our relationships with others, and are able to notice any changes in these and be willing to talk about any concerns with someone.
- **Pay Attention to Breathing Properly!** - It is really important for stress management and processing the effects of anxiety on our bodies, to breathe properly. Sometimes when we are tense we forget to do this and can actually end up holding our breath whilst working under pressure. It needn't take too long to address this and you could try this quick breathing exercise 'the 10 second meditation' - sit up straight, feet on the ground, breathe in for 4 seconds (through your nose) and out for 6 seconds (through your mouth). Do this focused breathing at least every hour if you can.
- **Process Feelings** – if our feelings remain unexpressed, it makes it more difficult to think clearly. Think about ways that have worked for you in the past, in expressing yourself. This might be talking to a peer or your supervisor or it might be through using creative methods such as writing a journal or painting and drawing.
- **Food Intake and Hydration** – Distressing situations can negatively impact our eating habits, either through over or under eating or not eating healthy food. Maintaining a regular and healthy diet is essential for physical wellbeing and even more important at this time. It is also really important to keep hydrated as this particularly helps

when our bodies are under stress. Try to keep a large jug or bottle of water near to you and aim to drink a glass of water every hour.

- **Pace** - break tasks into small chunks and don't do anything for longer than an hour if possible. Aim to take a 5 minute pause at the end of each task - particularly if doing IT or online tasks, as this will help with concentration and productivity. If you are working from home and it is possible, perhaps take 5 minutes to go outside and get some fresh air and sunshine.
- **Managing Meetings Online** – whilst there is some amazing technology helping to keep us all connected during the pandemic, it can be exhausting and throw the balance of our day (Hickman, 2020). There is a different quality to our attention when we are online. We are hyper-focused on the few available visual cues that we normally gather from a full range of available body language. It is a stimulus-rich environment, where engaging with people virtually, is different from doing this in person. It is important not to add to this challenge by multi-tasking i.e. working on emails or other documents whilst concentrating on online meetings; and being disciplined in keeping meeting times down to a minimum and avoid them going on for longer than an hour without a break.
- **Compassion, Empathy and Kindness** - Working under the current circumstances of COVID-19 will impact on us all in different ways and may stretch our capacity to be compassionate and empathic towards others. What will you notice about yourself when you are finding this harder to do? What do you need to do about it? Notice your own emotional state - are conversations making you feel tearful, tired, irritable? What are these feelings telling you about what you need?
- **Containment** - We are all under even more emotional strain and pressure at the moment and the people who we support are likely to have and even higher need for our help, particularly for social workers to provide containment. Who is providing emotional containment for you? Who is looking after you? How might you find containment? You could consider asking for some additional reflective space in supervision.
- **Emotional Support** - our work as in adult social care requires us to face issues of trauma, loss and grief on a sustained basis, often absorbing the unbearable feelings of others, such as fear, anger and emotional pain. This is compounded by the fear and uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 and therefore increases our need for emotional support, in order to process some of the direct and secondary impact of these powerful feelings. Take some time to consider how this is affecting you and what you might need and how these needs may be met through resources at work and away from work, such as supervision, coaching, counselling or activities such as sport or creative arts.
- **Your Physical Health** – if you are concerned about your health, are pregnant or immunosuppressed for any reason, talk to your manager about what you need and to review your direct contact with service users.

What Should We Avoid Doing?

- Avoid being judgemental or critical by saying things such as 'you're over-reacting'.

- Avoid minimising how colleagues feel – your team member is being open in sharing with you and saying things such as ‘it could be a lot worse’ or ‘you’re young, it’s ok for you’ is likely to shut down the conversation
- It’s important not to reject how people are feeling or ask them to hide how they feel, because this can encourage avoidance and internalisation of emotions which is not healthy and can contribute to depression, anxiety and post-traumatic distress. Such statements might include ‘pull yourself together’ or ‘you need to be strong for....’ (Tyler, 1996)

Finally, this time calls for a call to mindfulness and the crucial importance of reflective spaces and mindsets for empathic engagement with each other. It is easy to be seduced by a crisis into adopting a heroic posture when ‘being’ and ‘being ordinary’ is what is required (Ruch et al, 2018). Rather than the crisis provoking reactions it needs to evoke reflections. When the world becomes unfamiliar it is important to pay more attention to elements of the world that you are already familiar with, and avoid being enticed into inventing new ways of thinking about relationships. For professionals faced with the challenge of providing services at this time, it is therefore important that we fundamentally look after ourselves and each other, in order to sustain the effective provision of care and support which continues across the country at this time.

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