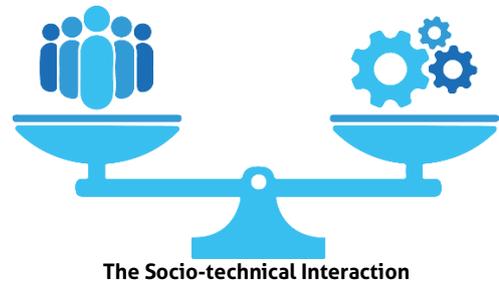


Reducing the risk of PTSD in Hospital Workers during COVID-19

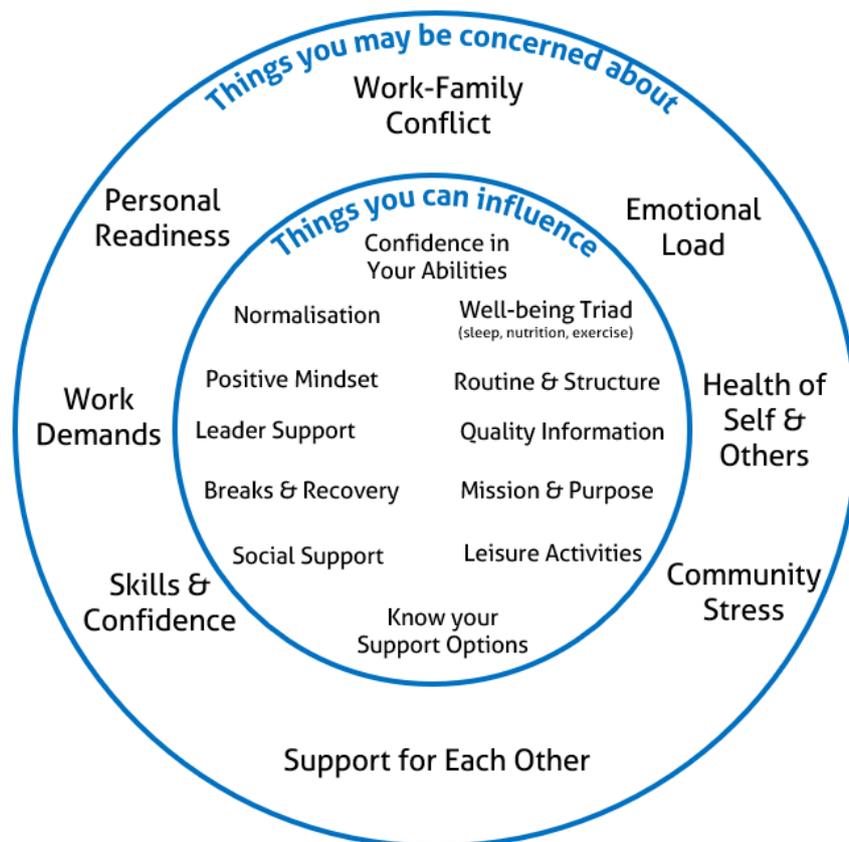


Tips for hospital staff

The current outbreak of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19; referred to here as COVID) is likely to affect us all differently. Those on the frontline like health practitioners, hospital staff and first responders are no exception. As people working in hospitals, you will have particular concerns about how well you and your services can cope. As human beings, you might be feeling overwhelmed and anxious with the information, conversations and increased community stress levels. Information and decisions are changing so quickly that life can also feel out of control and uncertain. We may also find that as time passes, how you and others are coping may change too. The following tip sheet aims to pull together the top few things you should focus on over this period.

Executive Summary: Personal Strategies

This tip sheet will talk you through what we know are psychological risks for hospital workers during this pandemic and the personal strategies you can use to build positive mental health and well-being. To be resilient and proactive, understand the potential concerns and focus on what you can influence and control.



Potential concerns

Potential concerns during this time:

There may be a number of things that may be concerns for you and your colleagues at this time. Those we have seen expressed by hospital workers include:

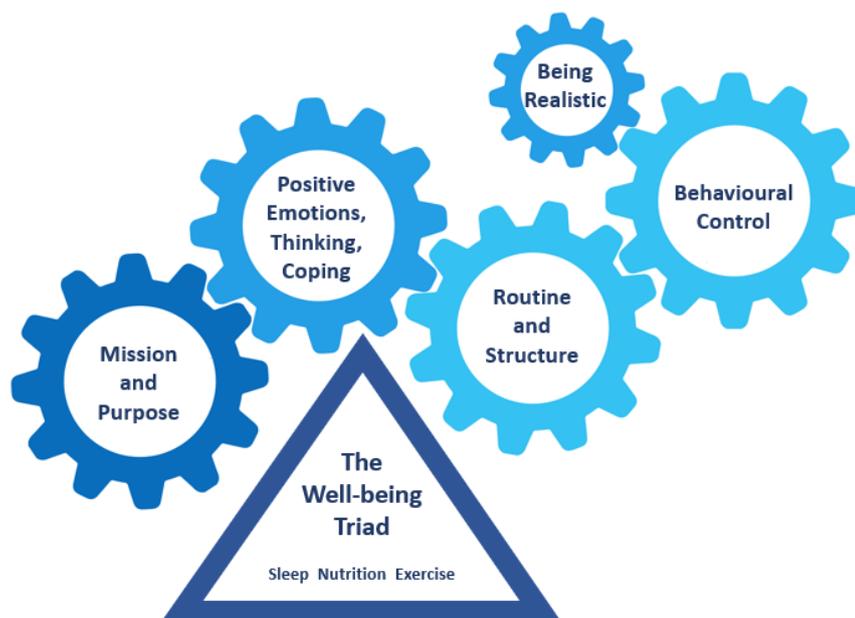
- **Work – Family conflict**
 - Caring for someone you know or a family member or leaving them at home to go to work.
 - Deciding not to work because of home responsibilities, or staying at a hotel so as not to infect vulnerable people at home.
 - Continuing to work but being concerned about potentially infecting those at home.
- **Personal readiness – Skills and self-confidence**
 - If community spread isn't controlled the number of patients in EDs and ICUs may increase. Concerns you may not have the mass casualty training or experience to prepare you for what is coming.
 - Being asked to care for COVID patients when your specialty is not infectious diseases.
 - Self-efficacy / self-worth – feeling that asking for help will seem like a failure for those who are used to feeling competent and confident at work.
- **Clinical care and the emotional load**
 - Wards that are full – ICU, medical wards.
 - Concerns that you soon may have to make heart-wrenching choices about whose life can be saved.
 - Concerns you cannot predict how this disease is impacting, patterns of symptoms being different across patients meaning you need to assume everyone is COVID-positive until proven otherwise.
 - Concerns about the supply chain and the potential for PPE rationing.
 - Dealing with aggressive, worried and upset relatives who may not be able to see their family members or say goodbye.
 - A sense of obligation to the hospital and co-workers. Not wanting to increase the burden on others or put them at risk.
- **Personal health worries**
 - Concerns for your own health and the health of people you care about.
 - The fact that you are caring for COVID patients or other patients who may be asymptomatic in a time of pandemic means you can't let your guard down because you could become infected at any moment.
 - Feeling guilty you have a job when others may not.
- **Community stress**
 - The sombre mood around you – people around you being concerned and anxious.
 - Anxiety around interacting with aggressive, worried and upset public.
- **Work demands**
 - The stress and fatigue of working long hours, constantly.
 - The mental and emotional workload at work and at home.
 - As COVID cases increase, there may be a lack of job variety and a lack of job control.
 - Working multiple consecutive days, overtime or extra shifts to cover peak demand means you may worry about having time to decompress, rest and recover. What is your risk of emotional fatigue or burnout?
- **Support to each other**
 - Concerns about how your family, friends and co-workers are coping and what you can do to help them.

Proactive and practical prevention strategies

Resilience

There are a number of key factors that we know are important to your resilience in the face of work-related stress and significant disasters.

- **Positive thinking:** Be a realistic optimist. Focusing on what you can do and what you have learnt.
- **Positive coping strategies:** Develop a focused approach to how you keep a balance in your life (e.g. sleeping patterns, social connectedness, maintaining routine etc). Proactively do things that are good for you and keep you on track.
- **Positive affect (emotions):** Mood is contagious. Monitor yourself and if you feel like you are becoming negative, look at why and aim to change that. Reframe around what is good and what you can do. Do things that make you feel more positive.
- **Being realistic:** keep yourself informed and realistic about what is happening and what it means for you. This means focus on good sources of information, however it important to limit your media exposure so you do not elevate your anxiety or concerns.
- **Behavioural control:** You can't control what other people feel or how they behave but you can control how you feel and think about things and how you respond.
- **Routine and structure:** Develop a routine for yourself and your family. You want to feel settled and feel there is a plan to your day and your week (less uncertainty).
- **Mission and purpose:** You want to have a sense of mission and purpose, a reason for getting out of bed in the morning. Revisit this and keep it in the forefront of your mind.
- **Well-being triad:** There are three things that form the basis of our well-being and we focus on with high performing teams like athletes and soldiers. Sleep, nutrition and exercise. When we get enough sleep and its good quality, we are eating well and moving our bodies, we will feel better. These three things are mood stabilisers. When we are focused on these three areas, we provide ourselves with a strong foundation for our well-being.



Preparedness and expectations

(Training and communication)

Realistic expectations and confidence in your abilities protects you psychologically:

- All the training you have done in preparation for this time, including scenario specific training, has prepared you. The rehearsal of processes, you practicing how to manage yourself and your reactions to emergencies, your clinical and team skill development, have given you more realistic expectations about yourself and what to do.
- Physiological control strategies: Using strategies like breathing control, attentional control and grounding can help you when busy or in an emergency. See the 'Apps' section for some example exercises. Rehearsing these during scenario-based training is important.
- All the times you have responded to sick and critical patients has allowed you to understand your responses to critical and emotionally demanding situations. You have learned how to normalise your post trauma responses and accept your own responses to trauma. This is an important first step to then managing them. You also have on many occasions used your social supports to help you cope – you are practiced at this. Keep doing this!

Confidence in your abilities

The more confident you are in your abilities as a health professional the more comfortable you will be with your decision making as you will trust your knowledge and skills.

- The more confident you are in your mission and purpose – that what you are doing makes a difference, the more protected your mental health will be. Review and refresh your mission and purpose, use it to focus your action.
- It is important to engage in things that help build your confidence and address issues or people who are eroding your confidence.
- Help build confidence by seeking training or appropriate support.

Work demands

(Cognitive and emotional load, rosters, breaks, recovery time between shifts)

Managing your workload and ensuring you get breaks is important for your mental health daily and long term.

- Take your breaks and meal breaks. They are important for rest and recovery for your brain when it's under cognitive and emotional load and for your physical health.
- Take your time off work seriously – make sure you use it for as much rest and recovery as you can. Aim to prioritise sleep, nutrition and exercise (the Well-being Triad). It is important to get household chores done too so you feel like those are under control – but try to pace yourself and enlist others you may live with to do a little more.
- If you are short on recovery time, the priority should be sleep and nutrition over everything else. Sleep helps us with physical recovery as well as mental recovery. During sleep we sort our experiences, emotions and learning. If you are not getting sufficient sleep, you will limit how effectively you deal with the cognitive or emotional load.
- Reach out to your manager / supervisor and ask them for help prioritising work tasks or discussing your progress. Seek support, advice and validation.
- Participate in clinical case discussions and scenario based training. Build your understanding and confidence in your skills and your actions.
- Make a list of people you can go to for advice and support. It may be there are different people for different questions.
- Learn to assert yourself and say no when you need to.
- Identify the routine you use to recover from work at the end of a shift and what activities you find give you rest and recovery when you are home. Make a conscious effort to make time for them. Keep walking the dog, working out, reading your book or gardening.

Social support

The biggest protective factor for your mental health is social support.

- Research shows that good support from your organisation, your leader and your co-workers makes a big difference to your well-being and mental health. Take time to connect and check-in, have a laugh, debrief or vent.
- Social support in your non-work life is also important – being connected to others provides you with emotional and cognitive relief. Make time to connect with family and friends. Use technology to stay connected.
- Don't confuse social support with social media. Genuine relationships with 2 or 3 people are far more supportive than hundreds of connections on social media. Aim for actual conversations and interactions, not scrolling through pages of other people's lives.

Good quality information

Frequent, good quality information can be very useful in reducing our stress levels, but don't over do it.

- It's important to get accurate information from credible sources as it will help you maintain perspective and feel more in control.
- Seek out a balance in the information you read or watch – make sure you are getting positive stories as well. How many have survived? How many are out of ICU? What are they doing now? How many patients are being supported by allied health professionals? How many rooms have been cleaned and prepared?
- Limit your media exposure. Being exposed to large volumes of negative information can heighten feelings of anxiety. While it's important to stay informed, you may find it useful to limit your media intake if it is upsetting you or your family. It can be helpful to take a break from social media and the 24-hour news cycle.

Stress management

Focus on using productive stress management strategies and take action to build your sense of control.

- A positive outlook is important at this time. The more positive you are, the more you control the negative narrative we can have in our heads, the happier and more productive we will be.
- Make sure you focus on how you are feeling, acknowledge and accept those feelings. It is important that you allow time to acknowledge them, and then move to a positive mindset. Ask yourself the question – so what would make me feel better?
- Focus on problem solving strategies and things you can do, not just the things you can't. Aim to get the feeling of control back – as you get things done you have a sense of accomplishment and that builds confidence and positivity.
- Think of a time when you have managed stress or anxiety well – what did you do? How did you overcome your feelings or concerns? Look to reuse those strategies.
- Make sure you engage in things you enjoy doing and that bring physiological and psychological release and refresh.
- Keep doing the things you enjoy doing. Book things in your diary you can look forward to.
- Limit alcohol and other drugs as coping strategies. In the short term they not only impair our problem solving and decision making and make us feel more down, they impair the quality of the sleep we get. Long term, they can become a significant problem across our life.

Monitor yourself and others

- Keep track of how you are feeling and what you are thinking. Know yourself and know when you are off track. Pay attention and look for practical things you can do to turn it around. Seek help when you feel overwhelmed or unsure. You have lots of options:
 - A close friend or family member
 - Your manager / supervisor or a mentor
 - Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
 - Your chaplain (if you have one)
 - A peer supporter (if you have one)
 - A close co-worker
 - Community resources such as beyondblue, Headsup
 - A Clinical Psychologist in private practice
 - The professional association relevant to your occupation or similar
- Monitor your co-workers and family and notice when they are not behaving normally for them. Reach out and help them to talk about their concerns and seek out professional help.
- Ask yourself “who is looking after our leaders?” Caring should be two way. Our leaders are juggling enormous responsibilities and workload. Check-in with them and see how they are travelling.

Mental health and resilience resources

Mental health and resilience

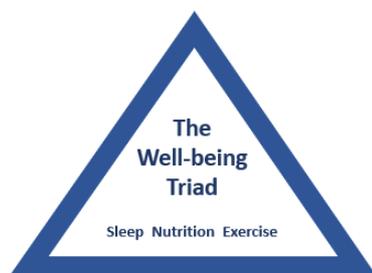


Videos available at Ted-Ed (evidence based):

- Grit: the power of passion and perseverance
- The philosophy of stoicism
- How stress affects your body
- How stress affects your brain
- What is depression?
- How to stay calm when you know you'll be stressed
- The psychology of post traumatic stress disorder

Other good reads:

- “Seven ways science can help you manage stress” – a blog available at www.headspace.com
- “The year of conquering negative thinking” – an article from www.nytimes.com (2017)



Videos available at Ted-Ed (evidence based)

Sleep

- What would happen if we didn't sleep?
- How does your body know what time it is?
- The benefits of a good night's sleep
- 7 healthy tips for a better night sleep
- What causes insomnia

Nutrition

- What would happen if we didn't drink water?
- How the food you eat affects your brain
- How does caffeine keep us awake?
- How sugar affects the brain

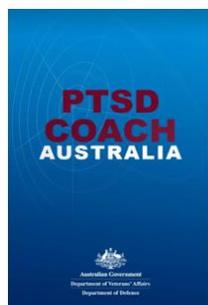
Exercise

- How playing sports benefits your body...and your brain.
- The brain changing benefits of exercise
- What stretching actually does to your body

Apps



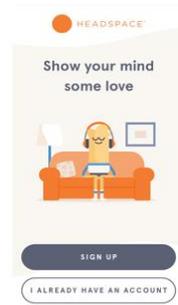
High Res
Stress management tools & resilience building strategies



PTSD Coach
Information and strategies for those with PTSD



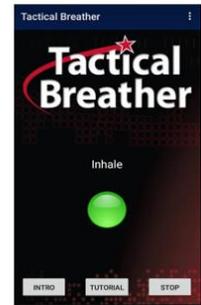
On Track
Track your drinking and spending in real time



Headspace
Mindfulness training – meditative routine, breathing exercises, cognitive diffusion



Breathe2Relax
Breathing techniques to relax



Tactical Breather
Breathing strategies to support performance and lower physiological arousal

Evidence base

At Performance Science HPO we believe in **practical** and **relevant evidence-based** solutions to ensure meaningful impacts for organisations and people. Our tip sheets for health professionals are based on the following sources:

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Performance Science HPO is a management consulting company focused on the development of high performing organisations and people.