

# Harvard Trauma Programs 10 Point Toolkit for Self-Care during the COVID-19 Crisis



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# Definition of Self-Care

- **Self-Care** is a natural state of wellness and wellbeing. The clinician works in a healing environment that provides high quality and clinically effective care to all patients. The healing environment itself, through its beauty, provides a place of safety, security, and restoration for the clinician and patient. Self-care begins with the creation of a nurturing environment where the achievement of excellence is fostered. Self-care occurs when the physical and emotional health of the clinician and the patient override competing concerns for financial success, efficiency, and productivity. A health care system, however, should never be allowed to foster physically and emotionally damaging self-sacrifice or administer its policies and procedures through bullying and organizational abuse.



# Definition of Self-Care

- **Self-care** is ultimately an integrated and holistic approach to the promotion of resiliency and wellness in all patients and staff where a premium is put on thinking freely, and working imaginatively and creatively in a scientifically and culturally sound environment. The capacity to be a healthy and affectionate clinician, co-worker and family member is maximized. Self-care is a system of clinical care that maximizes the health and well-being of patients, staff, and the community.



# What you can do

## *Take care of your family, friends, and loved ones first!*

1. Know your personal and organizational mission statement.
2. Achieve clinical and cultural excellence.
3. Engage in peer supervision and consultation.
4. Monitor and Regulate empathy.
5. Practice reflection: Spiritual and artistic.
6. Utilize deep breathing, mindfulness, and meditation.
7. Conduct daily, personal self-care activities; taking care of body and mind.
8. Create beautiful, natural healing environments.
9. Evaluate self-care goals.
10. Restore human dignity through kindness, compassion, and empathy.

***Top Priority: Take care of your family, friends, and loved ones first.***

Health care practitioners (including mental health professionals and humanitarian aid workers) are on the front-lines of the COVID-19 crisis. Maintaining their safety and well-being is absolutely essential! Many are working in medical systems where there was high stress and “burnout” before the crisis. Now, caring for COVID-19 patients has increased their stress and workload dramatically.

This self-care protocol aims to address their self-care needs. However, the family members, close relatives, and friends of the health-care providers need special attention. Doctors, nurses, mental health workers, and all staff involved need to make the care of their family members their Top Priority. Long hours at work, dying patients, and the stresses and strains of our COVID-19 response can lead to serious neglect of family members and loved ones. Make sure the family and loved ones are given your full attention and are safe and secure. Give them your full attention a few minutes every day. Pay special attention and assist vulnerable groups, such as, children, pregnant women, elderly, and sick and disabled in your family. Don’t be afraid to ask them for moral support, as well. Be readily available on your cell phone. Call home, even for a few minutes, each day and night (if working at night). Most importantly:

***STAY CONNECTED: STAY CONNECTED.***



# SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

## **1) Know your personal and organizational mission statement.**

Now is the time in this crisis to take your personal and organizational mission statement seriously. Work closely with your administrators and managers to eliminate all barriers to care. This crisis will reveal quickly all the weaknesses in the health care systems where you work. Offer constructive solutions and new ideas to your leadership for providing comprehensive and full care to patients from all social class backgrounds and cultures. While this crisis is not the time for a “revolution” in medical care, it will provide plenty of opportunity for improving the old conventional pre-crisis system of care. As we say at Harvard Medical School (HMS):

***“OPPORTUNITY COMES TO THE PREPARED; BE PREPARED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!”***



# SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

## **2) Achieve clinical and cultural excellence.**

The COVID-19 crisis is confronting all medical, psychiatric and social humanitarian providers with a new type of pandemic infection. All of you already are following closely the medical and scientific knowledge on this virus infection and its treatment, as it appears. Using accurate medical and public health knowledge will lead to a success in reduction in the care of infections and deaths. Share this knowledge as it emerges with your patients, family members, and your community. In your community, you may be the only source of accurate scientific medical knowledge.

***“KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK, STAY INFORMED!”***



# SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

### **3) Engage in peer supervision and consultation.**

In a crisis, professional peer supervision and support is critical. You must set up time to meet briefly, even if it is only 30 minutes a day, with your professional peers. In military-settings, crisis reporting and debriefing usually occurs at the beginning and end of the intense stressful introduction period. Young health care professionals such as interns, residents, newly licensed doctors, nurses, psychologists and social workers are easily emotionally and physically damaged by their work, especially without proper supervision. All of the young and newly certified health care workers must be supervised. The receptionists, translators, physical therapists, volunteers all must be supervised as well.

Supervision includes not only skill-based learning but also attention to the emotional stress of the care giver. Ethical problems related to triaging and dying patients will also arise often that will need to be addressed quickly.

***BE A TEAM: “LAVORO DI SQUADRA”***





## SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

### **4) Monitor and Regulate empathy.**

In a crisis the regulation of empathy is very difficult at the personal and professional levels. In a crisis the empathetic response must be scaled back but not totally eliminated.

Begin with paying attention to the affective ambiance of the environment. Does the environment make the patient feel safe and secure? Begin with a human gesture (a nice friendly hello) to acknowledge the patient's humanity. Keep the patient (and family, if they accompany the patient) informed and reassured throughout the examination and treatment.

Always acknowledge they are important partners with you in the healing process. At the end of the visit see if something is worrying them that is not related to the coronavirus (e.g. maybe a pregnant daughter or a sick child or mother-in-law).

For patient in the intensive care unit or on respirators, remember this is an exceptionally frightening experience for the patient and family. In fact, it has been demonstrated that 50% of patients who survive intensive care develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The nursing profession has developed many effective ways in meeting this challenge. As always, in all medical cases, an empathic response can lessen the intense emotional distress and lessen the risk of burnout.

***PAY ATTENTION TO THE LEVEL OF EMOTIONAL  
EMPATHY OVERLOAD-AMONG ALL STAFF. ASK FOR  
HELP WHEN THE EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD REACHES  
A "BREAKING POINT"***



## SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS:

### **5) Practice personal reflection: Spiritual and artistic.**

When you are in a crisis working at maximum speed and energy it is difficult to take a few minutes out of the day to day for reflection. But reflection is a key for maintaining a steady-hand and staying “on-track”. The ultimate medical mission must be kept in mind, but also the personal mission needs to help serve as a compass to our heaviest of endeavors. As medical healers we are called upon to relieve the suffering of others without damaging ourselves and /or damaging our family members or loved ones. Our love for humanity will shine through as we show love for ourselves and our families. Everyone can keep a little totem in their pockets (e.g. animal figure, cross, sentences from the Koran) or picture (spouse, children) and or a plant on your desk. Step away from the crisis five minutes each morning, afternoon, and evening, to reflect upon all the goodness in the world; the great human beings in your life, and your love and devotion to your medical profession and medical community. After your work is a good time to engage in reflective writing about your day. You are dealing with life and death and great human suffering. So maintain a small shrine (does not have to be religious) where you can ask for the moral and physical strength to do your best job. And send love out to all that are around you to whom you care about and are caring for every day.

***DAILY REFLECTION PROVIDES A MORAL COMPASS  
FOR THE HARNESSING ALL THE POSITIVE ENERGY  
THAT EXISTS IN THE WORLD***

***REMEMBER: YOU ARE NOT ALONE-STAY  
CONNECTED!***



# SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

## **6) Utilize deep breathing, mindfulness, and meditation.**

Every practitioner, receptionist, translator, janitor – everyone – during this crisis work needs to learn and practice deep breathing. It is easy to learn – many excellent videos online exist. Deep breathing should be practiced every day before and after every difficult encounter. It takes only a few minutes and has remarkable impact on relieving the stress of the moment and centers oneself on the problem to be addressed. A daily practice of mindfulness and meditation, even if only fifteen minutes a day, can aid in stress reduction and enhance resiliency. There are many approaches to meditation. The Benson-Henry Center approach at Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital has been proven to be to be effective.

***DEEP BREATHING EXERCISES ARE NECESSARY  
TOOLS DURING CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND WILL  
LEAD TO STRESS REDUCTION AND ENHANCED  
RESILIENCE.***



## SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

### **7) Conduct daily, personal self-care activities; caring for body and mind.**

These practices are based upon good “common sense.” In order to sustain hard, stressful crisis work, attention to basic human needs – diet, exercise, and sleep - are essential. Running yourself into the ground in order to help others is high risk for burnout! Everyone dealing with COVID-19 is in danger of being physically and mentally hurt. All of the recommendations of this self-care protocol are aimed at maximizing teamwork and effective care as well as attention to the well-being of the medical providers and support staff. We all want no medical providers and/or staff to become ill with COVID-19 and absolutely want no-one to die from this illness. The military, for example, when operating in combat, always has an appointed person just assigned attending to the welfare of the troops. Plus, the buddy system of checking-in with one-another is an excellent system that also builds comradery and team unity. A good model to follow!

***WE MUST BE 100% COMMITED TO MAINTAINING THE WELLNESS MEDICAL AND SUPPORT STAFF. ASSIGN SOMEONE TO WATCH OUT.***



## SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

### **8) Create beautiful, natural healing environments.**

The Natural World is our greatest healing ally. In the late 1800's, the great nurse Florence Nightingale, understood for the first time that medical care needed to occur in a healing environment full of: 1) Light and clean air; 2) Nature; and 3) Spirituality. Extensive scientific research has revealed how correct Florence Nightingale was and, in recent years, the therapeutic power of plants and animals.

During this crisis, put a plant (especially a flowering one) in your office. Get out in nature, sit in the hospital garden and/or near-by park to reflect, relax and restore oneself, and when you have time, take a walk in the woods, along a farm road, or along a beach or lake by yourself (if necessary) and/or with your spouse, parents or children. Even when practicing social distancing you can spend time in the natural world. Take a break from using your computer or cell phone. It is no accident that the COVID-19 virus occurred through violations of the natural world. A natural world is rebounding all around us; (e.g. the dolphins coming back to the waters of Italy).

***USE THE TREMEMDIOUS HEALING POWER OF NATURE. PROMISE AFTER THE CRISIS IS OVER TO BE A GOOD STEWARD OF OUR NATURAL WORLD.***



## SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

### **9) Evaluate self-care goals.**

During the crisis, attention to self-care is not “Frosting on the cake” or a nice “side show”, it is essential to not only keeping our medical front-line workforce healthy, but also to make sure they are in top condition to provide the best medical diagnosis and treatment for those in need. In this time of crisis we need a *Results Oriented Evaluation (ROE)* that monitors the overall wellness of all medical and support staff. A simple self-care/wellness checklist is “good enough”. Every medical center and team need to monitor daily and weekly “how the staff” are functioning in the: 1) Physical; 2) Emotional; 3) Family/social; and 4) Spiritual domain. These policies and procedures need to be immediately implemented to correct the situation.

***PAY ATTENTION TO EVALUATING DAILY THE SELF-CARE DOMAIN. QUICKLY RESPOND IF NECESSARY, TO CORRECT THE SITUATION.***



# SELF-CARE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: WHAT YOU CAN DO

## **10) Restore human dignity through kindness and compassion.**

This crisis is both medical and political and it is having enormous impact on the society and its citizens and culture. The COVID-19 virus is having a distressing impact on the social and work life of individuals, families, local communities, and even at the nation and global level.

Every medical crisis and related tragedies can lead to a loss of dignity and feelings of impotence, panic, and fear. In Italy, for example, families are not able to see loved ones who have died or even see the bodies for a proper burial. These realities can have a devastating life on a family and community. While the medical staff cannot solve the socio-economic and political problems caused by the virus, they can help restore the lost dignity of their patients through a humanistic and companionate approach to medical care.

The tragedy of COVID-19 can strike any of us - especially medical frontline workers. Every person needs to reach out to their medical communities as well as their neighbors to help those in greatest need, such as the elderly, pregnant women, children, the refugee non- English-speaking immigrant, the disabled and the homeless. Supporting human dignity in this time of crisis by assisting our medical and local community is urgent and necessary. You have been empowered by medical science - and a higher calling -- to care for the sick and dying.



**EVEN WHEN YOU ARE IN A HAZMAT SUIT, GOGGLES  
AND MASK, SAY A KIND WORD TO EACH AND EVERY  
PATIENT YOU SEE!**

## **Affiliated Programs:**

Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma

<http://hprt-cambridge.org/>

Global Mental Health Trauma and Recovery Certificate

Program

<http://hprt-cambridge.org/>

Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, Massachusetts

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<https://www.bensonhenryinstitute.org/>

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