

Managing stress in pharmacy during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Pharmacists' Support Service is available to support all Australian pharmacists, interns and pharmacy students. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, PSS will accept calls for support from pharmacy assistants and pharmacy technicians. The service is available every day of the year from 8am to 11pm AEST on 1300 244 910. Support is provided by trained volunteers who are all pharmacists or retired pharmacists.

Why do I need to take extra care of my mental health during COVID-19?

Protecting your mental health will keep you functioning at your peak. Humans are hardwired to be afraid of the unknown and of anything that appears random and uncontrollable. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event for us all. Despite education and knowledge, pharmacists are just as likely to be feeling anxious as everyone else.

For pharmacists and pharmacy staff, knowledge of the risk of infection and the possible outcome can actually exacerbate fear, particularly as you read about the increased death rates in health professionals in China, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This is a normal response in these circumstances and such feelings are not a sign of weakness and it is important to acknowledge how you are feeling.

In addition, there is a huge amount of information about the COVID-19 pandemic everywhere we turn. Pharmacy publications, social media, pharmacy organisations, workplaces, and the news are all focusing on the topic with little respite. Your usual methods of diversion and relaxation may have become less available as social isolation is put into place to reduce the spread of infection.

Be self-aware and recognise those things that may be causing you stress and your own warning signs of stress. Be aware of your own tendency to be self-critical and have some self-compassion. Don't be so hard on yourself and others when things do not go according to plan. Be kind to yourself and to others.

Allow time for wellbeing

Be aware of how you are feeling and respond to your needs for rest and nourishment, whilst keeping active:

- Take regular breaks during work hours and when at home, including getting outside
- Maintain a regular sleep routine
- Pace yourself, this is likely to be a marathon
- Speak up if your workload is not manageable
- Eat healthy foods and drink plenty of water throughout the day
- Engage in physical activity within the required isolation restrictions

- Acknowledge your emotional state
- Don't rely on smoking, alcohol or other drugs to deal with your emotions
- Find healthy ways to reduce your stress level by doing something you like to do. For example, relax by listening to music; or being in nature; or practising yoga or meditation
- Keep learning new things. For instance, take on new responsibilities or rediscover an old hobby
- Be aware of where you can access mental health support if you need it
- If you're a manager, recognise that you don't need to have all the answers all of the time and that your wellbeing is important too.

Connect with others and be aware of the needs of your colleagues

Maintain your social connections with colleagues, family and friends by phone or online or with a WhatsApp group:

- Check in with colleagues and your staff routinely during the workday. Make sure they are taking breaks and managing their workload
- If you're a manager, design equitable rosters and workloads. For instance, rosters that provide for 'recovery time'
- Encourage teamwork and provide support for those that appear to be struggling
- Consider the needs of colleagues: help each other during the workday, or when possible, swap or adjust more stressful roles
- Listen to each other without interrupting
- Acknowledge how each person is feeling
- Thank each other and acknowledge everyone's effort
- Do something nice for another person each day, this only needs to be a small gesture, such as asking "R U OK".

To relax outside work, try to do something totally unrelated to work every day. Something which distracts you and makes you smile, even for a short period of time. Intentionally take some time out to disconnect from the news, social media, politicians, constant case updates and other sources of information about COVID-19.

Engage in your hobbies and interests and if you can't undertake your usual activities try something new which you can do at home; for example, cooking new recipes, learning a language, or doing an online course.

If you sense your anxiety is getting a bit out of hand reach out for help to debrief and reflect on how things are going. Access your support network; these could be friends, family and work colleagues, as well as professional supports such as your GP or psychologist and let them know how you are feeling. PSS is also available every day of the year between 8am and 11pm AEST on 1300 244 910.

Draw on skills you have used in the past to help manage previous life adversities or difficult situations. Think about what has helped before and how you can apply these strategies now. This could be as simple as breathing techniques to slow your heart

rate and stop you becoming over-whelmed. Other stress reducing activities may be regular walks in nature or some physical exercise.

Speak to a psychologist or counsellor if your usual methods of managing stress are not working; they can help you develop other strategies to manage your own personal stress.

Be nice to your colleagues and patients. Treat them well and with respect and show them you care. Practise kindness and compassion in all aspects of your life.

Managing your mental health while in self-isolation or quarantine

There are a number of ways to support your mental health during periods of self-isolation or quarantine:

- Remind yourself that this is a temporary period of isolation to protect others in the community avoid contracting the virus
- Maintain your connections with friends, family and colleagues via email, social media, video conferencing, telephone or WhatsApp
- Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing
- Maintain a regular sleep routine and eat healthy foods
- Try to engage in some form of physical activity
- Establish routines and maintain wherever possible
- Try to view this time as a new experience that can bring health benefits
- For those working from home, try to maintain a healthy balance by allocating specific work hours, taking regular breaks and, if possible, establishing a dedicated workspace.

Working from home can make it harder to maintain a healthy balance and can make it difficult on family members who are not working or studying. Going to work requires some discipline that can be lost when working from home. Find a way to keep that discipline by:

- Scheduling *everything*, including meals, time with family, etc., and enforce that schedule. Make time for your family.
- Limiting work activities to one location in the home if at all possible. For instance, having a 'work location' that is visibly and audibly isolated from the rest of the house.
- Maintaining many of the usual rituals including 'dressing for work'; 'going to work'; 'being at your desk at a certain time'; and 'coming home from work'.