

14.

MENTAL WELL-BEING OF PATIENTS

1. Medical and mental health clinicians are likely to encounter patients who are experiencing various levels of emotional distress about the outbreak and its impact on them, their families, and their communities. We must consider that COVID-19 patients have long hospital stays and in the early stages they will experience the anguish of having an aggravation of the disease with the possibility of being intubated. Furthermore, the limited staff available will not be able to guarantee them continuous assistance and their relatives as well.
2. Providers should acknowledge uncertainty about emerging diseases and help patients understand that there is often an emotional component to potential health concerns.
3. Providers should be cognisant that the

symptoms might extend beyond classical mental health symptoms to include relational struggles, somatic, academic, or vocational issues.

4. Every person, including mental health providers, can either react in fear, anger, or despair and regress, or can choose resilience and play as an active part of the solution.

In addition, providers should consider the following recommendations for promoting patients' mental wellbeing during emerging infectious disease outbreaks.

Be informed: Obtain the latest information about the outbreak from reliable public health resources in order to provide accurate information to your patients.

Educate: Healthcare providers are on the front lines of medical intervention and in a position to influence patient behaviors for protecting individual, family, and public health.

Psycho-education is of utmost importance in the aftermath of disasters. Patient education plays a critical role in both containing the disease and mitigating emotional distress during outbreaks. Depending on the nature of the outbreak, this can range from education about basic hygiene such as hand-washing and cough etiquette to more complex medical recommendations for prevention, diagnosis, and treatment.

5. Let patients know what you, your office, or your organisation is doing to reduce the risk of exposure.
6. **Correct misinformation:** In this age of social media, misinformation can spread quickly and easily, causing unnecessary alarm. If patients present you with inaccurate information related to the outbreak, correct their misconceptions and direct them to vetted public health resources.
7. **Limit media exposure:** the excess media exposure to coverage of stressful events can result in negative mental health outcomes. Use trusted media outlets to gather the information you need, then turn them off—and advise your patients to do the same
8. **Anticipate and counsel about stress reactions:** emotional distress is a common mental condition in the context of uncertain and potentially life-threatening situations, such as COVID-19 epidemic. A good first step for mitigating your patients' stress is to acknowledge that it exists and help normalise it ("I see that you're stressed, and that's understandable. Many people are feeling this way right now").
9. Teach patients to recognise the signs of distress, including worry, fear, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, interpersonal problems, avoiding certain situations at work or in daily living, unexplained physical symptoms, and increased use of alcohol or tobacco. This will help them become more aware of the state of their mental health and head off distress before it becomes harder to manage.
10. Discuss strategies to reduce distress, which can include:
 - being prepared (developing a personal/ family preparedness plan for the outbreak);
 - taking everyday preventive measures (e.g., frequent handwashing);
 - maintaining a healthy diet and exercise regimen;
 - talking to loved ones about worries and concerns;
 - engaging in hobbies and activities you enjoy to improve your mood;
 - if a patient is experiencing severe emotional distress or has a diagnosable mental illness, refer for specialized mental health care.

