Novel Virus, Novel Stressors: Emotional Support Resources for Physicians and Health Care Providers

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Anxiety is a normal, emotional response to a threat, and COVID-19 has threatened each and every one of us to our core. COVID-19 has added unique challenges and uncertainty to an already overwhelmed health care system populated by a health care workforce teetering on professional burnout. COVID-19 has significantly increased work demands by elevating the medical complexity of caring for patients with cancer. Social distancing requirements have led to changes in workflow, the need to learn new processes and technologies to deliver telemedicine, and physical disconnection from our patients and colleagues. Unknowns related to the course of the pandemic contribute to our demands by requiring constant adjustments to a shifting landscape.

This novel virus introduces novel stressors. Changes in our work and personal lives are occurring in tandem with diminishing resources in the workplace, including reduced access to equipment intended to keep us safe and reduced staffing due to illness. In very simple terms, stress occurs when demands exceed our resources. Therefore, when demands are on the rise as they currently are due to COVID, a good strategy to recalibrate the stress equation is to bolster one’s resources. This can be most effectively accomplished when the strategies employed address the controllable and the uncontrollable aspects of the stressor.

There are many aspects of this pandemic that are out of our control, including its course and the behavior of this novel virus. Many people get stuck when they dwell on uncontrollable aspects, which can lead to worry and rumination. First, focus your attention on using problem-focused coping strategies to address controllable aspects of current stressors.

— Consult with colleagues
— Leverage resources to reduce exposure risk
— Increase personal health behaviors
— Employ active coping and self-care

Many organizations, including ASCO and the NCI, have information available on COVID and clinical practice guidelines. VitalTalk is a nonprofit organization that provides resources to facilitate high quality patient-provider communication. Dr. Anthony Back (University of Washington) co-founded VitalTalk and has created an impressive COVID-ready communication skills guide to address the many complex and difficult clinical scenarios imposed by COVID-19.

Once you’ve addressed controllable factors, emotion-focused coping strategies can then be employed to reduce stress that remains after addressing factors within your control. Some examples are listed below. When stress and anxiety are high, it can help to hit the reset button by purposefully redirecting your attention to the top of the list to focus on things in your control.

CONTROLLABLE: PROBLEM-FOCUSED STRATEGIES
— Seek info on COVID and practice management

UNCONTROLLABLE: EMOTION-FOCUSED STRATEGIES
— Emotional expression
— Cultivate compassion
— Cognitive reappraisal
— Mindful meditation
— Distraction

Advances in technology have led to the rapid expansion in web-based programs and apps to promote health and self-management. I strongly recommend the web-based
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program available for free at Virusanxiety.com. The site provides comprehensive education on health-related anxiety and a range of techniques and interactive exercises to promote adaptive coping skills.

Headspace is a wonderful app to teach mindful meditation. Mindfulness is a very effective strategy to provide relief from anxiety about the future by focusing on the present. Headspace has added content titled “Weathering the Storm” which is tailored to managing COVID-related stress and is available to health care providers free of charge. The Calm app provides dozens of mindful meditation exercises as well as sleep stories which offer an effective distraction from the worrisome thoughts that keep us up at night. Calm also provides diaphragmatic breathing exercises; diaphragmatic breathing is deceptively simple in effectively engaging the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system to reverse the negative physiological effects of stress. Mentalhealthapps.org provides access to eHealth interventions that have been publicly funded and are now available for free. Last, the Cancer Support Community is a wonderful resource for patients and their caregivers. In response to COVID, the Cancer Support Community has expanded the hours for its toll-free support line: 888-793-9355.