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This newsletter is full of information relevant to the issues surrounding COVID-19 and the mental health implications it has on caregivers and support people.

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HCQU CARES



COVID-19: The Mental and Emotional Implications for Today's Caregivers

Written by Brittany Hribar Fenclau, Behavioral Health Supervisor

In March of 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was named a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). People went from activities like dinner with family or friends to being afraid to leave home.

Uncertainty, information overload, and changes to daily routines occurred almost overnight. The implications of the pandemic have made waves that continue to impact daily life in the present day (Mayo Clinic, 2020). As the pandemic enters its third year, it is important to consider the impacts that it has had on the mental and emotional health of people in the United States. More specifically, consider how COVID-19 contributes to the daily stress of those in caregiving roles.

People in our society have now become well-educated about the proper way to wash their hands, where and how to wear a face mask, and precautions they can take to stay healthy. Debates about what is and what is not safe and appropriate occur daily, from conversations between co-workers to online debates on social media platforms. The truth is that COVID-19

has many unknowns, and unknowns lead to fear. As Mertens et al. (2020) stated, "fear is an adaptive response in the presence of danger. However, when threat is uncertain and continuous, as in the current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, fear can become chronic and burdensome." From fear comes stress and anxiety, leading many to wonder how to overcome chronic stress while under the burden of chronic fear.

With education, a sense of calm and resiliency are possible. Among many articles and tips to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists numerous ways to cope with and reduce stress during the time of a pandemic. Researchers suggest taking care of oneself and then reaching out to support others. In fact, helping others cope is listed as a way to decrease isolation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). While this may be true, compassion fatigue is also possible, especially when a person spends their livelihood as a caregiver. One can truly care so much that it has a negative impact on their own life (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

With stress and compassion fatigue being identified as effects of COVID-19, this edition of the HCQU CARES newsletter focuses on explaining the terms of mental and emotional implications, how they manifest, and how to overcome them. With this knowledge, caregivers will be able to better protect their mental and emotional health at a time when uncertainty and the need for knowledge remain constant. This newsletter also reviews the importance of establishing methods of self-care, appropriate boundaries, and a sense of balance in one's life, so that the stress and compassion fatigue resulting from COVID-19 can become manageable (Berry, 2021).



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What is Stress and How Can One Cope with It?

Written by Elizabeth Hobbs, Clinical Educator

Everyone has more than likely said, “I feel so stressed” or “I’m so stressed out right now” at some point in their life. With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing into its third year, people might be feeling more “stressed” than ever. Understanding what the word stress really means, what causes stress, and what can be done to combat it are ways to help someone move from feeling stressed to feeling calm.

The Mental Health Foundation (2021) defines stress as “the feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure,” whereas Medline Plus (2022) describes stress as “a feeling of emotional or physical tension.” While these definitions are helpful, they do not consider that many people who are coping or trying to cope with stress feel overwhelmed by the process. A recent study uncovered that some people are so overwhelmed by stress that they can no longer turn to a preferred coping skill, such as physical fitness. The simple thought of trying to exercise can increase feelings of being stressed (Marashi et al., 2021).

Regardless of the definition used, when a person is stressed, they know it and feel it. It may feel heavy and unrelenting.

What causes stress?

Stress is the result of internal factors - thoughts or “stressors” arising from events that leave a person feeling “frustrated, angry, or nervous.” These stressors can be caused by anything (Medline Plus, 2022). Stressors can be short term (acute), such as experiencing unexpected heavy traffic that impacts one’s ability to arrive at work on time. On the other hand, stressors might be long-term (chronic) worries or concerns about matters such as health or when the pandemic will end. Chronic stress is even more concerning when it exists for so long that a person no longer realizes they are experiencing it (Medline Plus, 2022).

How does the body respond to stress?

The human body is designed to deal with stressors. When a stressor is encountered, the body releases certain hormones to increase muscle tension, blood flow, and alertness (Medline Plus, 2022).



Symptoms experienced in response to stressors can include:

Physical Symptoms

- Lowered energy, fatigue
- Headaches
- Stomach problems (diarrhea, constipation, upset stomach)
- Weight gain or loss
- Body aches, pains, muscle tension (stiff neck)
- Chest pain
- Frequent sickness (colds, infections due to a weakened immune system)
- Loss of sex drive and/or abilities
- Nervousness
- Clenching jaw, grinding teeth
- Sleep disturbances (too much or too little sleep)

(Medline Plus, 2022; Mayo Clinic, 2021; Cleveland Clinic, 2021)

Behavioral symptoms

- Change in appetite (eating too little or too much)
- Decrease in energy or focus
- Increase in use of substances to relax (drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes)

(Medline Plus, 2022; Mayo Clinic, 2021)

Emotional symptoms

- Feeling agitated, frustrated, and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Difficulty relaxing and/or quieting thoughts
- Feeling bad about self (feeling lonely, worthless, depressed)
- Avoiding people

(Mayo Clinic, 2021)

Cognitive symptoms

- Frequent worrying
- Racing thoughts

This produces what is known as the fight-or-flight response; the body must decide if it is going to face or run from the situation.

With chronic stress, a person is at increased risk for certain health conditions, including:

- Cardiovascular disease (heart disease, high blood pressure, and/or chest pains)
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Mental health issues (depression and/or anxiety)
- Skin problems (acne and/or eczema)
- Menstrual problems
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Sexual dysfunction

(Medline Plus, 2022; Mayo Clinic, 2021)

Due to the serious nature of these health conditions, recognizing one's stressors, knowing the triggers, and taking appropriate steps to mitigate them are necessary to avoid potential serious medical complications. Every person is unique. Even with the same stressor and similar situations, people react differently to stress, which can vary the symptoms they experience (Scott, 2020).

Cognitive symptoms (continued)

- **Forgetfulness, being disorganized and unfocused**
- **Using poor judgment**
- **Having negative thoughts, being pessimistic**

(Dewitt, 2020)



What can you do?

Stressors are part of daily life and often are difficult to avoid. Therefore, it is important that people learn to manage their reactions to stressors and decrease the effects. It is important to identify when stress is problematic, recognize the warning signs of stress, and know when to act. Consider what is causing the stress; make a list, separating the causes into factors that one can change and factors that are beyond one's control. Create a realistic plan to address the factors that can be changed. Consider reducing commitments and involvement in stressful situations. Prioritizing and setting realistic limits, expectations, and commitments can make stress more manageable. It takes practice and work, but it is well worth the effort (Mental Health Foundation, 2021).

Another component of stress management is to build supportive relationships and create a social network that can be called upon for help and practical advice. With increased use of technology during the pandemic, more opportunities are available for people to pursue activities of interest and expand social networks. This can also boost one's mood. Communicating with others might help a person to see things differently and improve their outlook (National Institutes of Health, n.d.).

Like healthy relationships, a healthy lifestyle can positively affect one's mood. Proper nutrition, healthy choices, physical activity, and adequate sleep are key components of stress management. Establish a healthy eating plan to ensure necessary amounts of vitamins, minerals, and water. Limit the use of tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine. If planning exercise workouts feels stressful and overwhelming, start by walking for 15-20 minutes, three times a week. One of the best ways to reduce stress is through a good night's sleep (Mental Health Foundation, 2021).

As responsibilities pile up, time for self-care is a priority. Journaling, yoga, meditation, and trying new routines are ways to fit self-care into daily life (National Institutes of Health, n.d.). Mindfulness has also been shown to help with managing the effects of stress. Jon Kabat-Zin, known as the founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction, stated that mindfulness "involves slowing down and paying very close attention" (Meraji & Douglis, 2022).

Finally, it is always important to practice kindness to oneself – not only in times of stress, but in general. Every person has limits and can only function effectively until those limits are exceeded. Having a positive outlook, practicing stress management techniques, and thinking about what makes one feel grateful can help keep stress manageable (Mental Health Foundation, 2021).

If feelings of being stressed and overwhelmed continue, do not hesitate to reach out to a clinical professional or doctor who can make referrals for additional help, including therapy, counseling, and mindfulness-based approaches.

For more information and resources, visit:

["How to Sleep Better" by the Mental Health Foundation](#)

["How to look after your mental health using mindfulness" by the Mental Health Foundation](#)

[A guided mindfulness meditation practice for beginners by Jon Kabat-Zinn](#)

[Mindfulness resources and audio practices from the University of Oxford's Mindfulness Centre](#)



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COVID-19 and Compassion Fatigue

Written by Erin Sass, Clinical Educator

Being a caregiver often requires an open and compassionate outlook on life. One might even say that it takes a “big heart”. Caregivers put their energy into listening and understanding others, helping others get their needs met, and at times, carrying the burdens of those in their care. This can put physical and emotional strains on caregivers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the strain on health care workers and other types of caregivers is even greater due to “limited resources, overwhelming workload, longer shifts, disruptions to sleep and work-life balance, process inefficiencies, occupational hazards, and concerns about health and financial instability having to work longer hours, picking up more shifts, not having consistent access to necessary” (Wong & O’Conner, 2021).

COVID-19 presents a greater emotional challenge for caregivers supporting people with intellectual disabilities. A study of U.S. health care organizations found that “having an intellectual disability was the strongest independent risk factor for presenting with a Covid-19 diagnosis and the strongest independent risk factor other than age for Covid-19 mortality” (Gleason, et.al, 2021).

As caregivers are performing the responsibilities of caring for others and trying to adjust to the added challenges presented by COVID-19 while doing so, they are also trying to cope with the impacts of COVID-19 on a personal level.

These challenges might include feeling isolated and helpless while quarantining, worrying about the health and safety of oneself and loved ones, experiencing loss, and adjusting to new rules and changing routines. Without protective factors – such as supportive people with whom to share emotions and experiences, time to rest, and awareness of signs of mental and emotional strain – even the strongest caregivers can experience what is known as compassion fatigue (University of Washington, 2022).

Compassion fatigue has two components – burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Burnout is the experience of feeling constant emotional exhaustion, a lost sense of self, and less effective and dissatisfied within the work environment (Berry, 2021). Some might describe burnout as feeling as if one is drowning or has a dark cloud over their head. Secondary traumatic stress is the stress felt when one hears another talk about traumatic events they experienced. This might happen when a caregiver is exposed to information about others’ traumatic experiences and feels it on a deep emotional level. Secondary traumatic stress can cause caregivers to experience intrusive thoughts, feel numb, or feel they have nothing left to give (Clay, 2020).

Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue include sleep disturbances, intense emotions, difficulty concentrating, impaired judgment, and anger toward events that the person would not normally feel angry about. In addition, caregivers may notice “loss of productivity, depression, intrusive thoughts, jumpiness, tiredness, feelings of being on edge or trapped, or inability to separate personal and professional life” (Clay, 2020). A caregiver’s ability to care and empathize for others can become diminished from overuse of caregiving skills. Compassion fatigue is a process and often builds over time, taking weeks or years to surface (University of Washington, 2022).

Compassion fatigue can result in depression and anxiety, physical and emotional exhaustion, less enjoyment of work and leisure activities, difficulty in relationships, and decreased quality of care. It is a real phenomenon with serious consequences for caregivers and the people they support, and the signs can be difficult to recognize (Clay, 2020). The likelihood of caregivers experiencing compassion fatigue increases as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

Preventing and Managing

Awareness and recognition of compassion fatigue is important. Consider the following strategies to help prevent and manage the signs and symptoms.

Improve your sleep.

- Take time to wind down and relax before going to bed.
- “Bank sleep” – If you know you have a long shift ahead, sleep longer before going to work.
- Allow yourself time to recover after a long shift - sleep longer, take naps up to 30mins long.
- Get physical activity well before you plan to go to bed, as it may allow some people to sleep better.
- Avoid drinking caffeine several hours before going to sleep.
- Avoid drinking caffeine several hours before going to sleep.

(Mayo Clinic, 2020)



Know steps to take if you feel too tired or fatigued at work.

- Check in with coworkers to make sure everyone is able to manage shift demands.
- Monitor yourself and coworkers for signs of fatigue.

(CDC, 2021)

Connect with yourself.

- Talk to someone about your experiences and how you are feeling.
- Understand that what you are going through is not unusual.
- Do things that interest you outside of work.
- Determine things that you value and that are important to you.

Try to avoid:

- Finding fault and blaming others.
- Working longer shifts and/or at higher demands, when possible.
- Resorting to self-medicating.
- Ignoring your own interests, needs, and wants
- Excessive complaining about your job.

(University of Washington, 2022)

Another strategy for managing and preventing compassion fatigue is maintaining balance in your life. Find things to do for yourself – practice self-care, get rest, allow for mini-escapes or longer breaks to relieve the intensity of work. Laughter, exercise, hobbies, reaching out to friends and loved ones, and thinking about what brings joy to your life are helpful, too. Acknowledge losses and allow yourself time to grieve. Stay true to your goals and focus on the things you can control (University of Washington, 2022).

Practicing self-care and making sure your needs are met can reduce your risk for compassion fatigue.

A healthy lifestyle that includes rest, plenty of sleep, a healthy diet, and meaningful relationships can help caregivers cope with their experiences. These strategies help you to be positive and committed to providing quality care. They take effort and practice, but the benefits for you and those who you support are worth it.

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