Managing COVID-19 Anxiety as a Health Care Provider

WELCOME MESSAGE

Dear Residents, Fellows, and Faculty,

In light of the challenging and rapidly evolving situation with COVID-19 and in recognition of the unique reality that many of you are facing as frontline health care providers, this special issue of THRIVE is dedicated to the topic of managing and coping with COVID-19-related anxiety in healthy and practical ways.

We understand that residents have many questions and concerns under the COVID-19 situation regarding, among others, personal safety, family care, and preparing for licensing exams with uncertain dates. We asked the McGill Resident Wellness Ambassadors to share with us what residents’ biggest stressors are at this moment in time. We are grateful for their speedy response. Based on their accounts, we have compiled a list of questions and have re-directed some of them to the PGME Office for inclusion in their next Q&A under Special Notices. These questions pertain to hospital procedures, protective equipment, safe practices regarding clothing and food, and daycare accommodations. For questions not already addressed, please contact pgofficer.med@mcgill.ca.

In this issue, we will address questions we received on how to cope with some of the different stressors you currently face; learning environment concerns; and financial accommodations. As more questions arise related to these, please do not hesitate to contact us at paola.fata@mcgill.ca or martha.chamodraka@mcgill.ca.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude for your tireless work and dedication to helping others in these difficult times.
COVID-19 and its Impact: A Personal Message from Dr. Paola Fata

I am beginning this special issue of THRIVE with a story. Mine. Because I have friends and close family living in all parts of Italy from Milan to Rome. Some are working as health care professionals in a reality that is very different from our own. In just a few short weeks, their lives have changed dramatically. The effects on their ability to deliver care to their patients has moved from treating infected patients to deciding which patients should be treated. Just three weeks ago, Italy barely had a problem and now the country is in a national lockdown. Even walking your dog needs authorization papers.

It is a time when social media, like FaceTime and Skype really bridge the distance and reduce the social isolation. At the same time, constant exposure to news can have an impact. It is difficult even for me to avoid repetitively checking COVID-19 updates and imagining apocalyptic scenarios for my family abroad. *It is normal to be fearful, anxious or powerless, especially with uncertainty.*

I realize your concerns extend far beyond what lay people are feeling. As we find ways to adapt to this unfamiliar and rapidly evolving situation, it is important to me to make sure that you have the necessary resources you need for your psychological well-being. In the meantime, I also want to hear your concerns and assure you that we will do everything in our power to improve your working conditions and support you in managing your personal circumstances.

I recognize that now is just as important as ever to prioritize our residents' physical and mental well-being. On my end, I will work on some initiatives, such as providing meal credit (Uber eats, delivery, cafeteria), taxi and ridesharing fare reimbursement to residents directly engaged in COVID-19 effort, and hope to have positive results in the coming week.

In this issue of THRIVE, you will find strategies to manage COVID-19-related anxiety and stress as a resident/healthcare provider. Anxiety is understandable and normal in this context of uncertainty, collective distress, and rapid changes. During these times, it is important to dedicate cognitive efforts to focus on what is within your control, as opposed to that which is beyond. Using relevant resources, gathering reliable information, adopting self-care when possible, and knowing when to seek help is within your control and can help you better navigate these times.

Lastly, you will find the contact information of the PGME Wellness Consultants so that you can schedule a virtual/phone appointment, if desired, as well as a list of community counselling resources. We are here for you.

Wishing you all good health and perseverance.
Q & A

1. **QUESTION:** *I am worried about catching the virus and – more importantly – spreading it to my family, including my children and elderly parents who need my care.*

   **ANSWER:** This is certainly the most common and most normal fear amongst healthcare professionals. It is also a pervasive stigma that physicians regularly face. We recommend trying to focus on *what is in your power to control.* Trying to take all the necessary precautions (e.g. washing hands upon arrival at home, showering, etc.). Staying home if symptoms are observed or if you are immunosuppressed yourself. Avoiding very close contact with elderly family members (hugs and kisses) and considering making alternative arrangements within the extended family for care of the elderly, if at all possible. Beyond what is in your control, we would encourage you to keep reading for ways to tame the anxiety about what is not in your control.

   We would like to encourage our residents with known health conditions that place them at elevated risk for complications should they contract COVID-19 to speak with their Institution’s Occupational Health.

2. **QUESTION:** *We were all told very clearly that we would get minimum 8–10 weeks notice for our cancelled Royal College exams, but now they are keeping the exact same exam dates giving us less than 4 weeks notice. For many of us R5s who have families, elderly parents, and young kids who can no longer go to school, the stress is enormous. How are we expected to study and perform on the toughest exam of our lives under these conditions?*

   **ANSWER:** It is expected and understandable that your ability to focus on studying will be significantly compromised under these circumstances, especially considering that licensing exam dates have been a moving target. This issue is still being discussed at the Royal College and with the Postgraduate Deans. Please make sure to check the Royal College website for regular updates:

Below, you will read and hear about evidence-based strategies to help you stay calm, composed, and focused during the windows of opportunity you create for yourself to study. Mindfulness strategies have been shown to be particularly helpful, as well as brief exercise routines, good nutrition and sleep to boost your energy levels.

If you find that your level of anxiety is not manageable, please reach out to one of the two Wellness Consultants: www.calendly.com/martha-chamodraka and www.calendly.com/camilavelez

3. **QUESTION:** Some of us are alone in the country with no immediate support network and with the border closure, family/spouses are no longer allowed in the country. How can we cope with feelings of isolation?

**ANSWER:** We can completely appreciate how being alone in the country with no immediate support makes everything so much harder for many residents right now. Sadly, there is no easy way around it at the moment.

Feelings of isolation are bound to emerge and this is why now, more than ever, it will be important to stay connected, albeit remotely, and choose your supports carefully. Speak to friends, colleagues, and family regularly, and try to limit conversations about COVID-19 (especially with individuals whose anxiety leaves you feeling worse), while discussing other topics, especially ones that make you feel good or make you laugh (and no, it is not insensitive to laugh at the ever-growing number of COVID-19 jokes related to the excessive consumption of toilet paper and such). It may also be helpful to create a routine so the days are more structured. Try to avoid staying at work longer than needed and engage in self-care activities, such as reading for pleasure, watching comedies, taking bubble baths, doing yoga, jogging, and meditating.

4. **QUESTION:** We are concerned about the number of shifts we may need to cover, as quarantine and hospital restrictions become stricter and we need to cover for coworkers. Some programs have removed their R5s from their study leave adding to the anxiety.

**ANSWER:** It is entirely understandable and valid to feel stressed, even frustrated, about the prospect of having to work longer hours (if not already doing so). As we are functioning under emergency measures and planning, we have to be ready for a surge in patient numbers or redeployment outside our primary areas of expertise. Attendings are in a similar situation too and feeling the same level of discomfort. Many residencies are already scaling down the number of residents on services to minimize exposure. Our priority is to ensure your safety.
Please remember we are planning and preparing right now. When we do ramp up our clinical activities regarding care for COVID-19 patients as it becomes necessary, we encourage you to take breaks to recharge and we will ensure adequate time off between shifts. If you feel that what is being asked of you exceeds your physical and/or mental capacities, please inform your program director immediately and Cc Dr. Fata.

5. **QUESTION:** What should we do if we receive bad evaluations from attendings due to self-quarantine?

   **ANSWER:** Evaluations should absolutely **not** be affected by self-quarantine. If this happens, please contact Dr. Paola Fata immediately.

6. **QUESTION:** Some residents cannot afford using their car and parking at the hospital. With the increased risk of exposure on public transport, **is there any way of waving the fee for parking for the next two weeks or months?**

   **ANSWER:** This is a reasonable request and the WELL Office will investigate it.
COVID-19 and HEALTH CARE RESPONDER STRESS:
MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Healthcare Responder Stress
Healthcare responders are at higher than average risk for traumatic stress reactions because their work repeatedly exposes them to highly stressful situations. During a COVID-19 outbreak in Minnesota, you may experience far greater than average stress.

• You may face conflicting demands between work and family responsibilities.
• Have fear about contagion/spreading illness.
• Feel constant pressure to keep working along with a sense of ineffectiveness.
• Experience stigma (from community, coworkers, friends, and family).
• Experience isolation from family, friends, co-workers and community support systems.
• Have concerns about the health and wellbeing of yourself, your family and loved ones.
• You may not want to leave work when your shift is finished – regardless of whether your replacement has arrived.
• You will likely try to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment, and you may deny the need for rest and recovery time.

Regardless, you will not be untouched by the enormous gravity of the situation and you will experience sadness, grief, and/or anger. As a healthcare responder, you need to become fully informed about the impact that such an event may have on you personally and professionally, and how to protect yourself.

The Stress cycle
Stress elevates arousal or readiness. Within manageable levels, stress can help sharpen your attention and help you to cope with threatening situations. However, when stress arousal reaches maximum effect, the gain in performance is lost and your performance and health begin to deteriorate. If your stress response is active for a long period of time, it can damage your cardiovascular, immune and nervous systems. Long-term exposure to stress can also
create new, or worsen existing, mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse

**Recognize Your Stress Reactions**
The following list of common reactions is provided to help you recognize and monitor your stress level during a COVID-19 response.

**Physical Reactions**
- Rapid heart rate, palpitations, muscle tension, headaches, tremors, gastrointestinal distress, nausea, inability to relax when off duty, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, nightmares or flashbacks.

**Emotional Reactions**
- Fear or terror in life-threatening situations or perceived danger, anger, frustration, argumentativeness, irritability, deep sadness, difficulty maintaining emotional balance.

**Cognitive Reactions**
- Disorientation or confusion, difficulty problem-solving and making decisions, difficulty remembering instructions, inability to see situations clearly, distortion and misinterpretation of comments and events.

**Behavioral Reactions**
- Unnecessary risk-taking, failure to use personal protective equipment, refusal to follow orders or leave the scene, endangerment of team members, increased use or misuse of prescription drugs or alcohol.

**Interpersonal Reactions**
- Irritability, anger and hostility, blaming, reduced ability to support teammates, conflicts with peers or family, withdrawal, isolation.

**Implement Organizational Stress Management Policies**
- Limit working hours to no longer than 12-hour shifts.
- Utilize teams and limit amount of time staff work alone.
- Provide emotional defusing and assess responder functioning after each shift
- Nurture team support: Create a buddy system.
- Encourage breaks away from the scene.
- Promote a positive atmosphere of support and tolerance.
Practice Personal Stress Management

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Be careful not to identify too much with survivors/victims’ grief and trauma.
- Reduce physical tension by deep breathing, meditating, walking.
- Take brief breaks for basic bodily care and refreshment.
- Maintain a healthy diet and get adequate sleep and exercise.
- Avoid or limit caffeine and use of alcohol.
- Realize that it is okay to draw boundaries and say “no.”
- Talk with your co-workers about experiences; get and give support to one another.
- Ask for help if you need it.

Electronic Pamphlet taken (and format adapted) from:

ONLINE RESOURCES

Podcasts

WHYY Radio Times. Coping with Coronavirus Anxiety.
In this podcast, WHYY’s Radio Times explores the fear and anxiety that many people are feeling around the pandemic and strategies to manage our stress in a healthy way. Guests include Catherine Belling, Associate Professor at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, and Jane Shure, a psychotherapist.

Ten Percent Podcast. How to Handle Coronavirus Anxiety.
This episode discusses mindfulness-based strategies on how to stay sane, balanced, and calm in the midst of this pandemic. Guest speakers are Dr. Luana Marques, an anxiety specialist from Harvard University, and Jay Michaelson, a meditation teacher. Practical
and co-founder of The Resilience Group. The episode starts with a discussion of the director of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci’s Congressional testimony on the severity of the spread of coronavirus with Ezekiel Emanuel from the University of Pennsylvania.

tips for handling fear, uncertainty, and denial are addressed.

You will also find under the podcast a Guided Meditation for coronavirus responders.

TEN PERCENT HAPPIER HAS GRANTED FREE ACCESS TO ITS APP TO HEALTHCARE WORKERS IN GRATITUDE FOR YOUR EFFORTS!

Videos

Dealing with COVID–19 Anxiety
In this video, therapist Kati Morton discusses strategies to manage pandemic–related anxiety from a trauma–based approach. She discusses how to alleviate our stress–response and ground our activated nervous systems during these unsettling times.

Website

7 Science–Based Strategies to Cope with Coronavirus Anxiety – The Conversation
This article by psychology Professor Jelena Kecmanovic provides techniques from the science of psychology to better cope with COVID–19. Strategies include tolerating uncertainty and tackling existential fears.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations During COVID–19 Outbreak—WHO
These mental health considerations were developed by the WHO’s Department of Mental Health and Substance Use. The messages target different groups, including healthcare providers, and offer support for mental and psychosocial well–being during COVID–19 outbreak.
Free Online Resource

Learn How to Show Up To Each Moment With Mindfulness – Mindful Living Submit

March 19–22, 2020: Learn how to get started with mindfulness and bring your practice into action with leading neuroscience experts, top mindfulness teachers, and renowned psychologists

THE WELL OFFICE SERVICES

One-on-One Counselling

The WELL Office is working remotely until March 30, 2020, pending further directives. Wellness Consultants Dr. Martha Chamodraka and Camila Velez currently offer virtual and phone counselling appointments to residents and fellows. If our availabilities on Calendly do not match yours, kindly send us an email at martha.chamodraka@mcgill.ca or camila.velez@mcgill.ca

Consultation with the Assistant Dean of Resident Affairs

Dr. Paola Fata can be reached by email at paola.fata@mcgill.ca

MCGILL RESOURCES

McGill Student Wellness Hub
The Wellness Hub offers residents access to psychiatrists, doctors, and nurses.

*Please note that the Wellness Hub is currently closed and will resume operations online on Monday March 23.

McGill’s Office of Religious and Spiritual Life
Virtual faith volunteers help learners stay grounded in their faith and spirituality during these times.
COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Quebec Physicians’ Health Program (QPHP) / Programme d’Aide aux Médecins du Québec (PAMQ)
QPHP is a service staffed by physicians on-call who can provide confidential counselling to other physicians, medical students, and residents.

Argyle Institute
Sliding scale counselling services, currently offering virtual appointments.

The Quebec Order of Psychologists / Ordre des Psychologues du Quebec (OPQ)
The professional order of psychologists in Quebec offers an online directory to find psychologists and other licensed mental health professionals based on geographical proximity and reason for consultation.
*La Capitale Health Insurance (the McGill Residents’ group insurance policy) covers 80% of the fees with both the Intermediate and Superior plan, with maximum refund of 2000$ per calendar year.

Private clinics

- MediPsy
  Appointments can be requested via email only at info@medipsy.ca

- Westmount Psychological Services

- Mindspace Psychology Services

- Mont Royal Psychology

We hope that this special edition of THRIVE is of benefit to you. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any comments, suggestions, or want to get involved with THRIVE.

We wish you continued health, safety, and well-being.

Warmest regards,

The PGME Team @ The WELL Office / www.mcgill.ca/thewelloffice