

Mental health support for general practice during COVID-19

If you've felt anxious, exhausted or overwhelmed lately, you're not alone.

The recent pandemic has brought many challenges for us all, as we try to adjust to a 'new normal'. No one has escaped the wrath of COVID-19, and this includes our GPs and practice staff.

General practice has certainly been affected in many ways. There's been the challenge of supporting distressed or anxious patients and coping with increased pressure and demands at work. On top of this, many GPs and practice staff have also been juggling family responsibilities or found themselves separated from family who live interstate or overseas. However the pandemic is affecting you, it's important to keep a check on your mental health and reach out for support when you need it.

Demands of GPs often lead to burnout

Dr Jennifer Schafer, Medical Director for Qld Doctors' Health Programme (established by Doctors' Health in Queensland), says burnout is real and common.

"Doctors and other healthcare workers are particularly vulnerable to burnout at the best of times. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with the worst of times—the perfect recipe for exacerbating burnout," she said.

General practice staff are used to focussing on the health and wellbeing of others, but don't forget that you are important too.

"Doctors generally take pride in working hard, setting very high standards for themselves in a high-stakes profession, and prioritising care for others over their own needs," Dr Schafer said.

"The pandemic has exposed them to even greater than usual workloads, longer hours, and often no holidays. Working in healthcare is more stressful than usual, with increasing concerns and demands from patients, on a background of worry regarding the health of themselves, their families, and their businesses.

"Our community is frustrated by the ongoing pandemic, and it is no surprise that doctors and other healthcare workers are feeling overworked and overwhelmed as well."

Dr Rohan Rao from Keperra Medical Centre in Brisbane says COVID-19 has caused a large amount of stress and anxiety for general practice staff.



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"Our practice is running a vaccination clinic, so we have some patients who have been frustrated with not being able to book appointments or have access to certain vaccines. This has caused a huge amount of angst at times, particularly for reception staff."

In addition to the increased workloads and trying to support patients during this tough time, the physical health of general practice staff can also be in jeopardy.

"It's inevitable that at some stage we will come across a patient who has contracted COVID-19, and some staff are quite concerned about this," Dr Rao said.

"Some general practices are also based in shopping centres and areas where ventilation is not so good, which creates anxiety for some practice staff.

"Viability is a concern for some as general practice income is also affected by lockdowns. While telehealth has been useful, it's not unusual to see 40-50 per cent less patients during lockdowns.

Check in on your mental health

One of the challenges during these trying times is taking adequate care of our mental health. Dr Schafer says there are many and varied symptoms of burnout, including feelings of exhaustion, loss of empathy and even impairment of cognitive function.

"The consequences of burnout can range from a reduction in wellbeing, through to significant illness which may require extensive time away from work. Some doctors even leave the profession because of burnout.

"As doctors, we need to care for ourselves and our colleagues. Ignoring burnout or letting it escalate benefits no one."

Like all illnesses, prevention and early intervention are a priority.

Dr Rao has put in place several measures at Keperra Medical Centre to create a supportive work

environment and promote a workplace culture which values mental health.

"We are having more meetings as a team, which are a good platform to debrief, discuss concerns and check in with each other regularly. I also like to check in on every GP daily, to see how they are feeling.

"Reviewing our systems frequently is also helpful, as we often find ways to improve our practice and remove friction points to minimise stress."

It's also important for general practice staff to regularly check-in on their own mental health and play an active role in maintaining good mental health.

"If you don't, if you try to ignore feelings of being overwhelmed or highly stressed and just soldier on, it won't go away," Dr Rao said.

"It can also impact on the care you give. If your mental health is not right, it's difficult to help those coming to you with mental health problems."

Doing a regular mental health check-in can be as simple as taking note of your thoughts, sleep patterns, behaviour, and tension in your body.

For more information and a weekly check-in template, download A weekly mental health check-in fact sheet from the Black Dog Institute at bit.ly/MH-check-in.

Tips for self-care

When it comes to self-care strategies, there are several techniques you can try to help ease stress and anxiety. Dr Rao has heard some great suggestions from fellow GPs in his area.

"I know one GP who makes sure he goes for a walk outside around the practice after every ten patients – no matter what happens or how busy the day is. He says he feels fresh afterwards."

Another GP told Dr Rao he has kept his usual holiday schedule going, even during the pandemic.

"Most of us haven't taken a lot of leave – there's nowhere to go! However it's important to take time off and recharge, spend time with your family, and take time away from work."

Where to access support

There is a range of resources and services available to GPs and practice staff to help manage anxiety and stress during this challenging time.

Visit bit.ly/GP-support for information on services and support available in the North Brisbane and Moreton Bay region.

Happy Holidays from Sports & Spinal

The holiday season is a wonderful time to remember our friends, colleagues & the medical community who support us year-round. Sports & Spinal would not be possible without your support. We would like to take this moment to say **thank you** and send our best wishes to you and your families. May the New Year be filled with success and happiness!

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