

# RECOMMENDATIONS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR HEALTHCARE MANAGERS PROVIDING MEDICAL CARE TO COVID-19 PATIENTS

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## GENERAL REMARKS

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational support is needed to reduce the psychological impact on healthcare workers. Organizational support is provided by the chief physician and the heads of medical departments of a medical institution by adjusting the organization of work and implementing additional means of support.

Every person has a certain individual level of self-regulation and ability to effectively manage their emotions and organize their activity under normal circumstances. How ready is everyone to organize themselves just as easily and effectively in emergency situations and under extreme pressure?

Not every employee can reflect on their own state in a timely manner and to ask for peer support or professional psychological assistance. One measure that can significantly improve the effectiveness of medical care in an institution and enhance psychological resilience of employees is **the involvement of psychologists** working (both face-to-face and remotely) with all staff, patients, relatives of patients and staff, as well as with employees who have fallen ill outside of work or while performing their official duties.

Even a brief neglect or insufficient attention to the challenge of preventing and managing psychological stress factors can rapidly lead to emotional burnout and professional deformation even for very experienced workers, as well as to deterioration of the psychological climate even in a long-established team, to reduced compliance of patients and decreased motivation to cooperate with medical staff, and to the tension among patients' relatives.

It is very important for a healthcare manager to promote and fully engage the resources of self-regulation, self-organization and self-control of the staff from the very beginning, as these are the essential conditions for efficiency of each employee and the team as a whole.

The success of an efficiently organized medical care depends largely on the leader's awareness of his or her individual psychological features, and their use in potential extreme situations.



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**At times of the pandemic, stress becomes a natural draining factor** as a result of experiencing:

- 1 insecurity and uncertainty caused by the pandemic;
- 2 increased workload and psychological pressure;
- 3 the shortages of time and adequate personal equipment;
- 4 anxiety or fear of infecting oneself, families, and colleagues;
- 5 human losses in the course of medical work;
- 6 increased anxiety related to the risk of making a mistake in extreme working conditions and possibly being judged by the colleagues and the administration;
- 7 the inadequate or biased representation of the work medical institutions and their employees are doing, in certain media and online communities (cyberbullying, trolling, pranking, etc.);
- 8 concerns related to the possibility of being unable to cope with the situation due to the system overload and bearing responsibility for this;
- 9 fear of signing legal documents (e.g. a will) without having enough time to read them properly as usual;
- 10 anxiety in response to understaffing (withdrawal and failure to cope with the situation among employees, initial refusals to work as a response to reassignment, downsizing of the team due to the infection);
- 11 anticipation of being punished or judged for mistakes in diagnosis, treatment, documentation, etc.

A chief physician and heads of medical departments may have to deal with **the fears of the employees** (such as the fear of becoming infected and dying, the fear of infecting families and loved ones, etc.).



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**Cases of disciplinary violations** by the employees can become an additional source of stress for the person in charge:

- 1 reduced vigilance in recreation areas located in the red zone: employees removing their respirators, glasses, etc.;
- 2 non-compliance with safety rules by technical personnel, insufficient use of personal protective equipment;
- 3 non-compliance with social distancing and hygiene rules in the green zone: a crowd of people in a small space, etc.

**The psychological well-being of each individual and of the team as a whole is conditioned by** three complementary levels:

- 1 **the level of self-help** of each employee (composure, self-regulation, self-organization, self-esteem, self-examination and self-awareness that allow a person to maintain self-control);
- 2 **the level of mutual assistance** (empathy, mutual support and a sense of fellowship among employees);
- 3 **the level of professional psychological assistance provided by psychologists.**

## Recommended areas of work to provide psychological support for the employees

Organizing professional psychological support services to provide help for:

- ◆ doctors;
- ◆ nurses;
- ◆ assistants, interns, etc.;
- ◆ technical personnel;
- ◆ patients (taking into account their age);
- ◆ relatives of patients (taking into account their age);
- ◆ relatives of employees (taking into account their age).



## Measures that can be taken by a head of a medical institution together with the psychological support service

**The head of a medical institution must** keep track of the zones of regulation:

- 1 **Rational zone of self-regulation** – your rational, comprehensive and scientifically based picture of what is happening, your adequate representations, reasoned conclusions and professional actions;
- 2 **Irrational zone of self-regulation** – your extremely emotional level of response; experiences induced by unreasonably increasing anxiety, leading to fear and panic, paralyzing professional activities; worrying about the deterioration of patients' condition, their possible death without your professional help.

**Chief physician's challenge** is to stay in the rational zone of self-regulation and work organization as long as possible or to return there as quickly as possible, and to ensure that the employees do too. This is only possible if the psychological support service, encouraged by the chief physician, is organized correctly and provides psychological support for employees, including healthcare managers.

## Measures that can be taken by the chief physician or the heads of medical departments

As a chief physician or a head of a department working in conditions of a pandemic you can contribute to the psychological support for the employees by practicing certain behaviors:

- 1 **Your leadership should be visible.**

To that end, you need to set priorities. First of all, deal personally with priority tasks that require immediate attention. Cases that are important but not urgent can be put on hold, but you need to set a time frame for those. You can delegate some tasks to someone trusted so that you can focus on the most urgent tasks yourself.



- 1.1 Regulate, as much as possible, your psychological state (emotions and mood) to maintain a sense of confidence in the team and minimize fear and panic. Remember that your subordinates take cues from you.
- 1.2 Be visible, accessible and reliable. If possible, reserve some reception hours just for your employees and try to regularly respond to their requests, for example, via e-mail.
- 1.3 Help employees find and draw on psychological resources wherever possible (resting, family, exercise, etc.).
- 1.4 Remember that you can't have all the answers.
- 1.5 You need to adapt to the situation of uncertainty and learn to cope with it.
- 1.6 Your well-being is very important, don't forget about yourself.
- 1.7 You have opportunities to help your employees, and psychologists can help you with this task.
- 1.8 In case of emergency, be prepared to engage in work that used to be delegated to other employees.

## **2 Develop a communication strategy.**

- 2.1 Communicate with your employees frequently and regularly, in a simple and clear manner. Do not reject written and video requests. Encourage open expression of thoughts and feelings.
- 2.2 It is recommended to periodically conduct a short survey among employees (i.e. in digital form) on important current issues and/or on possible proposals for improving working environment and identifying interfering factors.
- 2.3 Share information and respect the feelings of subordinates: do not hide risks and plans, but provide information in a way that will reduce acute emotional reactions and set up a productive attitude.
- 2.4 Organize regular meetings to discuss the situation and further steps to overcome the crisis. Make sure that the employees have the opportunity and are allowed to ask questions and speak out.
- 2.5 Turn to your colleagues for advice and approval of your actions and decisions.
- 2.6 Emphasize the value of each employee's work, the importance of common goals, team's objectives and further solidary action ("we are a team", "together we will do everything possible").
- 2.7 Every day, try to remember together with your colleagues any positive events related to your teamwork, and mark the goals you have achieved.
- 2.8 Maintain the authority of young employees in the eyes of experienced staff in order to increase their motivation to engage in teamwork.



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### **3 Be receptive and understanding about your own psychological manifestations (emotions, thoughts, behavior).**

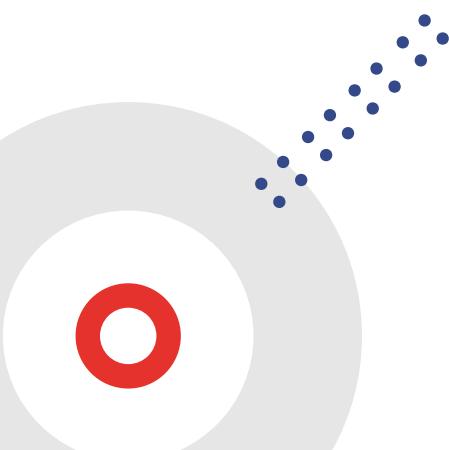
**3.1** Remember that it is normal to feel bad in an extremely unusual situation.

**3.2** If you are experiencing psychological distress, it does not mean that you are not doing your job well, only that you are a human.

## **Creating a professional mental health support in a medical institution**

### **Special measures designed to reduce the psychological burden on staff**

- 1.** Creating call centers and engaging psychologists and other human resources in talking to relatives and updating them on patients' condition may reduce the workload of medical staff involved in treating patients.
- 2.** Creating initiative and working groups focused on solving and optimizing certain issues; these groups may also involve volunteers.
- 3.** Creating an algorithm to transmit the information about a severe/terminal condition and/or a death of a patient, involving staff psychologists and trained volunteers in informing relatives of patients (with clear rules on what should be said and what information is not to be disclosed).
- 4.** Ensuring regular feedback from medical staff — a short survey about the ways their work could be improved (it can be more convenient to use an online anonymous questionnaire).
- 5.** Organizing the work of volunteers; distributing this resource to help the staff, the patients, the relatives of staff and patients in order to reduce stress and the workload on medical workers.



## Measures for promoting the engagement of the personnel, raising morale and maintaining trust in the leadership

- 1.** Creating additional incentive motivation for employees: emotional support, a personal appreciation (for example, expression of gratitude) from a supervisor.
- 2.** Organizing a survey among patients to collect their feedback before discharge and possibly displaying positive reviews in the green zone.
- 3.** Visualizing the achievements of your employees: printing out testimonials and displaying them inside the red zone (it is important both for staff as a burnout prevention measure, and for incoming patients as a means of coping with a stressful situation).
- 4.** Creating a photo gallery of all employees and/or providing employees working in the red zone with photo badges (as a means of showing their faces, since depersonalization makes it difficult to communicate with patients and colleagues).

## Measures to support staff mental health

- 1.** Ensuring a work schedule that complies with labor protection regulations and encouraging regular breaks.
- 2.** Making sure that the primary needs of medical personnel are met (food, drinking water, personal hygiene during and after long shifts).
- 3.** Reserving special areas for rest and physical activity (ping-pong, air hockey, a punching bag, etc.).
- 4.** Establishing detailed rules on behavior in rest areas.
- 5.** Providing the opportunity to work as a two-person team, which can promote mutual support, reduce stress, and enhance physical and psychological security.
- 6.** Pairing less experienced employees with their more experienced colleagues to improve the quality of patient care and boost self-confidence of the employees.
- 7.** Providing the employees with a sleep and rest schedule, with mandatory psychological support to those with sleep disorders (taking into account their individual features and preferences when drawing up the work schedule).
- 8.** Providing complete and clear information about how, when and in what order payments will be made, what benefits to expect, etc.





## **Maintaining as best as you can a healthy moral climate and a mutual support in the team**

- 1.** Implementing measures and techniques to reduce conflict and competition in the team.
- 2.** Providing communication channels so that workers can seek advice or help from their colleagues in difficult cases and maintain team spirit (e.g. a shared chat).
- 3.** Creating initiative and working groups focused on solving and optimizing certain issues; these groups may also involve volunteers.

## **Measures for implementing professional and competent psychological support**

- 1.** Reserving offices for providing psychological support (both online and face-to-face inside the green zone).
- 2.** Regularly informing employees that psychological support is available to them (i.e. providing contacts for psychological support that can be received remotely via telephone or a video conference).
- 3.** Organizing trainings and discussions on relaxation and coping strategies to help deal with stress, anxiety, etc. (including via online-conference).
- 4.** Training senior personnel to recognize the signs of emotional burnout and severe stress (depression, lethargy, irritation associated with thoughts about work, inability to relax, a tendency to negatively evaluate their behavior and their work, a decrease in professional self-esteem).
- 5.** Helping increase motivation of the employees who have been self-isolated or quarantined to return to work by paying special attention to their needs and their psychological readiness.
- 6.** Providing employees with materials and recommendations on self-support and self-help (including training videos).
- 7.** Organizing psychological support for relatives of the employees and the patients, taking into account their age (children, teenagers, older age group).

**WE WISH GOOD HEALTH, STRENGTH  
AND PATIENCE TO YOU, YOUR FAMILY AND  
YOUR EMPLOYEES!**

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF!**

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- ▶ These recommendations are compiled **under the editorship** of Chief Consulting Specialist in Medical Psychology of the Ministry of Health of Russian Federation, President of the Russian Psychological Society, and Dean of the Faculty of Psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, President of the Russian Academy of Education, Full Member of the Russian Academy of Education, Doctor of Psychological Sciences **Zinchenko Y.P.**

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