



SELF CARE DURING COVID 19

With the world facing a global public health challenge of unprecedented magnitude, and stress and uncertainty a constant, it is more important than ever that doctors in particular look after themselves.

The New Zealand Director General of Health, Dr Ashley Bloomfield, convened a meeting in late 2018 with representatives of DHB's and medical professionals to develop a plan to address health workforce well-being. He stated then *'While we expected to discuss the immediate issues facing the medical workforce and the long-term strategic issues, the clear focus on wider workforce wellbeing was not a topic we expected to come out so strongly and consistently from all parties involved.'*

The press release further stated 'Participants agreed that a strong focus on ensuring the wellbeing of the medical workforce – and other health workforce groups – would ultimately benefit patient care, the sustainability of the health workforce and the whole health system.'¹

The acknowledgement that health care professionals have been drawing on their resources for a long time is inherent in Dr Bloomfield's statement. However, it takes time for change to take effect. Consider the analogy of a supertanker coming into port; it changes course by degrees some way out to sea before reaching port.

Given that the pandemic is likely to be very prolonged in its effects on the healthcare system, it is even more important to pay attention to self-care and not ignore or defer one's own needs. To do so is ultimately a disservice not only to oneself, but also to the patient.

This means going back to the fundamentals:

Nutrition: eating regularly, healthy whole foods as much as possible. Practise eating mindfully, focussing on tasting and enjoying the food; time will be precious, but this practice can literally just take a moment. This will help to slow the mind and body. Remember to stay hydrated.

Exercise: ensure that physical activity continues, even if a 10 minute work out is all that is manageable, or one of the many meetings that you're attending is held whilst walking around the block.

Sleep: an essential, not a luxury, for mental and physical wellbeing. Being awake for 16-18 hours can have the same effect on reaction time as being at the legal blood alcohol limit while driving.

Avoid using your phone as an alarm clock, try not to use devices 30-60 minutes before bed, and avoid the temptation to self medicate.

Taking short naps, 15-20 minutes duration, can significantly increase alertness and reduce the risks of working fatigued. There is evidence to suggest that ingesting caffeine just before a short nap can increase its effectiveness, as it takes 15-20 mins to kick in. Too much however can lead to irritability and reduced effectiveness.

Mindfulness and deep breathing exercises can be very helpful in helping the body to 'wind down'.²

Relationships: often one of the first casualties in times of stress. Time for self and others is what nurtures and sustains our emotional health.

Seek and accept the support of family, friends, colleagues, and talk about your experiences and feelings.

Be kind to yourself and those around you, acknowledging tough situations and recognising achievements can help to make sense of what is happening, and is important for emotional processing in the long term. Kindness researcher Dr David Hamilton says kindness has a ripple effect. 'Our genetic ancestors survived hundreds of thousands of years because they learned to work together and to help each other. They thrived because they cared when someone was hurt and because they helped each other. We are here today because they learned that the best way to thrive as a species was to be kind.'³

If you can't be with people who matter to you, use technology to stay close and maintain relationships.

Conversely, it may be necessary to opt out of some activities; know that it is ok to draw boundaries and say 'no'.

Self-awareness: as over achievers, physicians are often very hard on themselves, and the inner critic can lead to negative thinking about ourselves, others and the world. It is well known that 80% of our habitual thoughts are negative because that is the way our brains are wired. Hence we need to first pay attention to our thoughts, and then work to counteract negative thinking. Thought stopping can be useful: notice the thoughts, imagine the STOP sign, and substitute a more positive and realistic thought e.g. 'I'm doing the best I can'.

Be aware of the 'hero' attitude, that the patient always comes first ...give yourself permission to challenge this narrative. Practise compassion towards yourself as well as others.

Some easy ways to shut off worries and wayward thoughts and be in the moment:

- Go for a walk, notice your surroundings, describe them to yourself, and count the steps if necessary.
- Picture something you love and hold the image for 30 seconds, then let it go, and repeat. (Also helpful when you are going to sleep.)
- Deep belly breathing; breathe in two three, hold for one, breathe out two three. This forces you to focus on what you are doing and relaxes the mind and body.
- Body scan – moving from head to toe, tense and release the various body parts, holding for ten seconds. (Also good if you are having difficulty falling asleep.)

When stress builds up it can lead to burn out (feelings of extreme exhaustion and overwhelm) and secondary traumatic stress (STS) as a result of vicariously experiencing another's traumatic experience.

Some signs of burn out:

- sadness, depression, apathy
- easily frustrated
- blaming others, irritability
- feeling indifferent or lacking feelings
- isolation or disconnection from others
- poor self care
- tired, exhausted, overwhelmed
- negative thinking: nothing you can do will help, not doing my job well, feeling like a failure
- negative coping strategies eg alcohol, drugs, tobacco.

Some signs of STS:

- Hyperalert i.e., easily startled or on guard all the time
- Hyperarousal e.g., racing heart, difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares and/or flashbacks
- Wanting to avoid people, places and situations that cause distress.

Learn the signs and keep an eye on each other.

Remember:

- It's normal to feel stressed in an abnormal situation. This does not mean that you cannot do your job or are in some way lacking, or weak. (See challenging negative thoughts in Self Awareness section).
- This is an unprecedented situation, so use the strategies that have worked for you in the past, and if you can attempt one of the strategies as listed in self awareness. Being exposed to a constant stream of news reports is anxiety provoking. Get the facts from a reliable source eg www.health.govt.nz or <https://www.health.gov.au> once or twice a day only.
- Be mindful of using dramatic language that might cause panic in others.
- And once again, be mindful of your expectations of yourself and others; it might take longer to think things through and make sense of a situation if feeling overwhelmed.

Support is available from Employee Assistance Programs or through the CICM Member Assistance Program with Converge International. Full contact details for Converge International can be found by [clicking here](#).

More resources can also be found at the CICM Member Health And Wellbeing Page here: <https://cicm.org.au/Resources/Member-Health-Well-being>

In New Zealand you can call or **text 1737** to talk with a trained counsellor for free, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Additional Online Articles & Resources

- Medical Economics.com – The 5 Elements of Self Care- <https://www.medicaleconomics.com/news/5-elements-physician-self-care>
- The BMJ.com Opinion - Doctors' wellbeing: self care during the covid-19 pandemic <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/03/16/self-care-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- DRS4DRS has a series of links on this page to useful information (including the two below which may be useful) <https://www.drs4drs.com.au/resource-hub/>
- CALM – Computer Assisted Learning for the Mind <https://www.calm.auckland.ac.nz/>
- Beyond Blue Australia - <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

References

¹ <https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/media-releases/ministry-health-will-lead-efforts-address-health-workforce-wellbeing>

² <https://ep.bmj.com/content/102/3/127>

³ <https://drdavidhamilton.com/how-kindness-is-contagious/#:~:text=If%20someone%20does%20something%20kind,your%20kindness%20is%20also%20contagious.>