

Addressing patients emotional needs during COVID-19 workup and diagnosis: Guidance for Clinicians*

As a healthcare provider, you are well-versed in delivering information to your patients. Given the severity of COVID-19, your patients may have additional worries and concerns that impact their health. This document intends to guide you through emotions that patients may experience as they are worked up for and/or are diagnosed with COVID-19, as well as throughout the management of their illness.

Fear and anxiety about a disease can feel overwhelming for all, even more so for those who might be at higher risk for contracting the disease and/or are experiencing social isolation. People who may respond more strongly to the stress of COVID-19 include:

- Older people and people with chronic diseases who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.
- Children and teens.
- People who are helping with the response to COVID-19; doctors, healthcare providers, and first responders.
- People who have mental health conditions including problems with substance use.
- People with a history of trauma.
- People who do not have health coverage.
- People who are immigrants, or may be undocumented.

Common psychological and behavioral responses to watch for:

Distress reactions

- insomnia
- anxiety
- decreased perception of safety
- anger
- scapegoating
- increased presentation to healthcare due to fears of illness

Health risk behaviors

- increased use of alcohol and tobacco
- altered work/life balance
- social isolation
- increased family conflict
- violence

For patients experiencing emotional distress, the clinician should:

- 1) Acknowledge concerns and uncertainty about COVID-19.
- 2) Share medical knowledge that is accurate and timely.
- 3) Identify steps the patient can take to reduce distress and sustain normal health behaviors.
- 4) Promote an internal locus of control – remind the patient of ways to decrease spread of the virus and other illness to their family/loved ones.
- 5) Share mental and behavioral health support resources.

Disaster Distress Helpline:
Call: 1-800-985-5990
Text: TalkWithUs to 66746

**National Suicide Prevention
Lifeline:** Call: 800-273-8255
Text: TALK to 741741

*Excerpts from (Center for Traumatic Stress online)

Additional Guidance for Healthcare Providers

1. Acknowledge and normalize distress reactions – use comforting statements like; “I see that you’re distressed, and that’s understandable.” “Many people are feeling this way right now.” “Know that worry and fear are natural.”
 - If the worry or fear impairs their functioning or leads to dangerous behaviors (excessive use of drugs or alcohol, suicidal thoughts, aggression), they may need additional support. Consider a referral to a mental health specialist.
2. Teach patients to recognize their own distress reactions and health risk behaviors and encourage them to self-monitor and/or check-in with family members or friends. Managing these responses early can prevent them from becoming impairing.

3. Discuss strategies to reduce distress, including taking care of their emotional health.

Providers should encourage patients to:

- a. Identify a support network – encourage them to reach out to these people when they feel overwhelmed or are ready to talk to someone about their experience. (While maintaining social distance, using phone or video chats.)
 - b. Reach out to a healthcare provider for questions about health.
 - c. Limit their exposure to media coverage about coronavirus, as it can become overwhelming. Remind them that this is a time to focus on getting better and staying positive. Encourage them to take daily media breaks.
 - d. Identify other stressors to put on hold while they recover (such as daily work).
 - e. Practice calming strategies and help patients identify what works for them. Refocus on positive thoughts and think of things they are grateful for in their life.
 - f. Limit their use of alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism.
4. Remind patients of the importance of taking care of their physical health. Remaining physically healthy will strengthen their overall mental health and well-being. Additionally, taking physical actions to combat illness and prevent spread promotes a healthy feeling of control in uncertain times.

Providers should encourage patients to:

- a. Maintain adequate fluid intake (water), promote healthy eating habits, get good sleep, and stick to a routine for these everyday needs.
- b. Continue to enjoy hobbies and activities (to the extent they are able) that are not too tiring – being mindful of social distancing.
- c. Enhance typical hygiene and preventive measures at home - frequent handwashing, cough etiquette, throwing tissues into the trash, proper cleaning/sanitizing of surfaces. Isolating their own sleep and showering space if possible. Maintain distance between themselves and family members while they are isolated at home. These actions will decrease likelihood of passing the illness to their family and promote a sense of control over the illness.

5. Refer patients to specialized mental health care for emergency evaluation if they experience severe emotional distress, develop a recurrence or worsening of mental illness, regularly use substances to manage negative emotions, or have thoughts of harming themselves or others.

Remind your patients that they are not alone during this unprecedented time. Encourage them to reach out to your office for medical or mental health guidance. If they have other concerns about how COVID-19 may be impacting their life, job, and routines please direct them to Michigan's COVID-19 resources:

Michigan
COVID-19 website:
Michigan.gov/Coronavirus

Michigan COVID-19
hotline (8-5 daily)
888-535-6136

Michigan COVID-19
email
COVID19@michigan.gov

A companion document may be helpful for your COVID-19 patients: **Addressing Concerns and Worries for Individuals with COVID-19: A Guide for Individuals** is available at Michigan.gov/Coronavirus.