

## CARING FOR PATIENTS' MENTAL WELL-BEING DURING EMERGING INFECTIOUS DISEASE OUTBREAKS: A GUIDE FOR CLINICIANS

As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, the potential for rapid and far-reaching spread of new infectious diseases is a growing threat. Especially in the early stages of an emerging infectious disease outbreak, there is frequently a great deal of uncertainty about the nature of the disease, its spread, scope, and impact. This may lead to significant and understandable emotional distress, even among those who have not been, and don't know if they will be, directly exposed to the disease.

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medical and mental health clinicians are likely to encounter patients who are experiencing various levels of emotional distress about the outbreak and its impact on them, their families, and their communities. Providers should acknowledge uncertainty about emerging diseases and help patients understand that there is often an

emotional component to potential health concerns.

In addition, providers should consider the following recommendations for promoting patients' mental well-being during emerging infectious disease outbreaks:

- 1. Stay informed.** Obtain the latest information about the outbreak from credible public health resources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in order to provide accurate information to your patients.
- 2. Educate.** As healthcare providers are on the front lines of medical intervention and in a position to influence patient behaviors for protecting individual, family, and public health, patient education plays a critical role in both containing the disease and mitigating emotional distress during outbreaks. Depending on the nature of the outbreak, this can range from education about basic hygiene such as hand-washing and cough etiquette to more complex medical recommendations for prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. Let patients know what you, your office, or your organization is doing to reduce the risk of exposure.
- 3. Correct misinformation.** In this age of social media, misinformation can spread quickly and easily, causing unnecessary alarm. If patients present you with information related to the outbreak that you believe to be inaccurate, correct their misconceptions and direct them to vetted public health resources.
- 4. Limit media exposure.** Today's 24-hour news cycle can make it difficult to turn away from the TV, radio, or news feed, but research has shown that excessive media exposure to coverage of stressful events can result in negative mental health outcomes. Use trusted media outlets to gather the information you need, then turn them off—and advise your patients to do the same.
- 5. Anticipate and counsel about stress reactions.** Emotional distress is common in the context of uncertain and potentially life-threatening situations, such as outbreaks.
  - A good first step for mitigating your patients' stress is to acknowledge that it exists and help normalize it ("I see that you're stressed, and that's understandable. Many people are feeling this way right now.")
  - Teach patients to recognize the signs of distress, including worry, fear, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, interpersonal problems, avoiding certain situations at work or in daily living, unexplained physical symptoms, and increased use of alcohol or tobacco. This will help them become more aware of the state of their mental health

and head off distress before it becomes harder to manage.

- c. Discuss strategies to reduce distress, which can include:
  - i. Being prepared (e.g., developing a personal/family preparedness plan for the outbreak).
  - ii. Taking everyday preventive measures (e.g., frequent handwashing and following coughing etiquette).
  - iii. Maintaining a healthy diet and exercise regimen.
  - iv. Talking to loved ones about worries and concerns.
  - v. Engaging in hobbies and activities you enjoy to improve your mood.
- d. If a patient is experiencing severe emotional distress or has a diagnosable mental illness, refer for specialized mental health care.

- 6. **Take care of yourself and your loved ones.** Healthcare providers are not invulnerable to experiencing their own emotional distress during outbreaks, and this distress can be compounded by caring for sick and distressed patients. Make sure your basic needs are met, including eating, drinking, and sleeping; take a break when you need one; check in with loved ones; practice the strategies to reduce distress listed above; and monitor yourself for stress reactions too. Make efforts to ensure that your office and/or organization has a viable plan to monitor the course of the outbreak and take rapid and appropriate action if needed.

**Sources of Credible Public Health Information during Emerging Infectious Disease Outbreaks**  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).  
<https://www.cdc.gov/>