

Ways to Address Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns

Health care workers often work under stress. It is important to address their anxieties and concerns. This document outlines common sources of anxiety among health care workers, and the types of messages, behaviors, and support they need from their leaders.

Main sources of anxiety for health care workers, and ways that leaders can address it, are identified in [Understanding and Addressing Sources of Anxiety Among Health Care Professionals During the COVID-19 Pandemic \(https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2764380\)](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2764380), on the Journal of the American Medical Association Network website.

Information in the article was gathered during listening sessions with groups of physicians, nurses, and other health care workers. Eight sources of anxiety were identified:

1. Access to the right **personal protective equipment**.
2. Exposure to COVID-19 at work and **taking the infection home** to their families.
3. Lack of fast **access to testing** if they develop COVID-19 symptoms and the fear of then spreading infection at work.
4. Uncertainty whether their organization will support and take care of their **personal and family needs** if they develop infection.
5. Support for **transportation, food**, and other personal and family needs as work hours and demands increase.
6. **Access to child care** when working extra hours and schools are closed.
7. **Having the right skills** if sent to work in a new area, such as a floor nurse sent to work in an intensive care unit.
8. Lack of access to up-to-date **information and communication**.

How to help your team

Leaders can help their health care workers in six main ways. They can lead, hear, protect, prepare, support, and care for them. The following tables list questions from health care workers to their organizations, and samples of ways to address their questions.

Lead them

| Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns | Sample Strategies |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why are leadership wearing different personal protective equipment than us or not using personal protective equipment that we are expected to use? ▪ What are the current guidelines? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leadership should always model behaviors they promote. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wear masks at all times. ▪ Use proper hand hygiene, including the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer. ▪ Head nurses should show staff every week how to put on and take off personal protective equipment. ▪ Have the administrator or someone from senior leadership do weekly rounds on the floors to show support for staff. ▪ Regularly post or share changed or updated guidelines – consider putting changes or updates at the top of communications to highlight them. ▪ Explain rules clearly. For example, say when infected staff can return to work and who decides when staff can return, etc. ▪ Explain where to get tested and what staff should do while waiting for test results. ▪ Use the same messaging everywhere. ▪ Develop lists of frequently asked questions and share routinely with staff. |

Considerations

- Use people that a target audience trusts to model desired behaviors or deliver messages.

Hear them

| Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns | Sample Strategies |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does leadership know what we are worried about? How will they address our concerns? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Set up ways to get input and give feedback. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Form listening groups, set up text or email suggestion boxes, hold meetings, set up huddle groups for each shift, and make leadership visits. ▪ Consider platforms such as WhatsApp for direct messaging to health care workers. ▪ Do a quick assessment of health care worker needs and concerns. |

Considerations

- Look at the whole picture when doing assessments, to better understand the needs and concerns of health care workers.
- Make sure health care workers are part of the decision-making processes.

Protect them

| Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns | Sample Strategies |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Will we have access to the right personal protective equipment? ▪ Have we had the right training to use it properly? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Address supply chain management issues and regularly update health care workers. ▪ Identify ways to make the best use of personal protective equipment. ▪ Develop a clear system for how and by whom personal protective equipment is used. ▪ Offer information online about using personal protective equipment. ▪ Reinforce the correct use of personal protective equipment. Use a buddy system or connect with staff members one-on-one to check that equipment is used the right way. |

| Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns | Sample Strategies |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do we keep ourselves and our families safe from exposure to COVID-19? ▪ What protections do we have against job insecurity: not getting paid, trouble for speaking up about concerns, pressure to work when sick, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Model and reinforce actions health care workers can take to keep themselves safe at work. Stress that following safety steps at work protects those who are near to them at home. ▪ Share information on worker protections and clearly communicate policies about pay, working when sick, etc. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Will we have fast access to testing if we develop COVID-19 symptoms? Should we worry about spreading the infection at work? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify the various testing avenues for COVID-19 that are available to your staff. Keep this information updated (e.g., if there are free testing “events” nearby) and make staff aware of these options. ▪ Consider one-on-one mentoring with staff that need extra support. ▪ Set realistic expectations. Be honest about what can and cannot be done at that moment. Follow through on everything you say you will do. |

Considerations

- Keep staff informed about the status of personal protective equipment.
- When conserving personal protective equipment, follow CDC guidance. Post clear instructions for re-using facemasks, respirators, gowns, gloves, and other personal protective equipment. Post the instructions where they are easy to see.
- Consider connecting with individual staff that need extra support.
- Be honest about what can and cannot be done at that moment. Follow through on everything you say you will do.

Prepare them

| Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns | Sample Strategies |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Will we be able to give competent medical care if we are assigned duties different from our normal work, for instance, if a floor nurse is sent to work in the intensive care unit? ▪ Will someone prepare us for what to expect when an outbreak occurs, how to handle grief and loss, or where to go if we need help? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Give just-in-time training to staff with new duties. Make sure they get the information they need to do the new job. ▪ Teach staff how to recognize and prevent first and second-hand stress. ▪ Consider doing simulation training exercises to prepare staff for outbreaks before they occur. |

Considerations

- Use people that a target audience trusts to model desired behaviors or deliver messages.

Support them

| Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns | Sample Strategies |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can we count on access to child care during increased work hours and school closures? ▪ Because sites are so overwhelmed, will emotional and psychological support be placed at the bottom of the list? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Offer support for child care. ▪ Offer hotel rooms or trailers to staff members who do not want to go home and potentially expose their family members. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Will there be support for food, lodging, transportation, and other personal and family needs as work hours and demands increase? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide access to emotional and mental health support. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Give staff a list of local resources. ▪ Set up a hotline. ▪ Be clear about what services your organization can provide. |

Considerations

- Hold regular meetings where staff can discuss their needs.
- Give staff lists of local resources for food banks and help with housing and transportation.
- Set up a hotline where essential workers can get information on child care and financial help.

Care for them

| Health Care Worker Anxieties and Concerns | Sample Strategies |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Will the organization support/take care of our personal and family needs if we are infected? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Be clear about what services your organization can and cannot provide.▪ Talk to headquarters, other organizations, and community organizations to see what services can be had at low or no cost. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Will we have access to up-to-date information and communication? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Hold weekly meetings to update staff, and post information sheets with important updates. |



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