STAY SAFE MN

Tips for Communicating with Health Care Workers

Below are tips and best practices that may ease some concerns and anxieties of doctors and other health care workers during the pandemic.

Recognize health care worker anxieties and concerns

It is possible that many concerns about COVID-19 are based on belief, but that the beliefs are also accurate. When a concern or anxiety is valid, acknowledge it rather than try to change it. For example, playing down a rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths to try to calm health care worker concerns may:

- Raise questions about your credibility and honesty.
- Seem as if you are "not hearing," or are out of touch with health care practitioner concerns.

Instead, focus the conversation on ways to protect health care workers even as cases rise. The most helpful thing that leadership can do for staff who are stressed is to provide a supportive presence – to check in and actively listen. Supportive listening shows staff that you care, which helps to re-build a sense of safety and trust.

Use past actions to predict the future

Highlight past successes of health care workers in dealing with flu, measles, or other outbreaks. Use examples that have something in common with the current event. This can help raise health care worker self- confidence and lower fears.

Model desired behaviors

Watching others model desired behaviors is a powerful learning tool. It may help raise the belief health care workers have in their own abilities, reduce some of their anxieties, and boost morale.

It is important to choose the right model for the target audience. A credible model makes people more open to the message. Ask health care workers who they respect and trust as sources for the different messages you want to deliver and behaviors you want to change. For example, they may prefer that a

head nurse show the right way to put on and take off masks, gowns, and other personal protective equipment (PPE).

Modeling is best done in person, but can also work as video.

Motivate changes in behavior and thinking

Use reminders or prompts at the right time to help motivate changes in behavior and thinking. These can be visual cues, such as well-placed signs about hand-washing, or even a text message sent in the evenings with a positive note or asking staff to practice self-care (e.g., prompt staff to look at their COVID-19 wellness pocket guide when arriving at home).

Counter negative messages with positive ones

Social media can load people with conflicting and false messages that are sensational and cause anxiety. Try spreading positive messages more often to offset negative ones and to correct information that is wrong. Suggest people limit the time they spend with social media and news reports. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting. Start team huddles with a positive message to set the tone for the shift.

Increase health care worker's sense of control

The unknowns about COVID-19 scare many people. It can make them feel they have lost control. Try to focus on safety practices that health care workers can control, such as hand hygiene, wearing masks and properly donning and doffing PPE. Have them make personal plans to manage their environment and exposures both at and away from work.

Recognize that it is hard to increase their sense of control if they do not have the needed masks and other personal protective equipment. Keep staff updated about progress in getting the right PPE. Show leadership is working to address their concerns.

Reinforce social and emotional support

The need to belong gets stronger during a crisis. Yet reinforcing social and emotional support is sometimes overlooked when people are focused on self-protection.

Encourage the development of buddy systems. Buddy systems can let people know they are not alone and can reinforce desired behaviors. Buddies can make sure they each use PPE the right way. They can watch each other for signs of stress and listen to each other's concerns.

Emphasize that repeated practice makes them safer

As health care workers practice safety procedures and desired behaviors, they will get better over time. This will increase their feelings of control. Researchers are learning more about COVID-19 every day, and so are they. Make sure staff understand the value of procedures, behaviors, and precautions and how and why they are effective.

Recognize new challenges

COVID-19 is presenting new challenges for all of us, especially for health care workers. Facial expressions help us communicate and bond with people. Wearing masks and face shields limits the non-verbal communication health care workers can have with patients. The ability to develop empathetic relationships with patients may decrease as a result, which may affect health care worker-patient relationships. This may make it harder to provide patient care, which may give health care workers added stress.

Older patients, especially those with dementia, intellectual disabilities, or other mental health issues do better with routine. Health care workers working behind masks can have a negative effect on the orientation and mental health of patients. So can a ban on visitors and other safety measures. These changes also make the jobs of health care workers more challenging.

Recognize how these changes present not only new work challenges, but also new emotional challenges for health care workers. Health care workers may experience anger, sadness, and frustration with their work environment, which may put them at an increased risk of compassion fatigue as they struggle to continue to provide care and empathy to their patients. Be aware of staff who are struggling and encourage them to utilize their buddy system, their employee assistance program (EAP), or professional mental health support services.

Normalize feelings when appropriate

Staff member experiences, feelings, and concerns are probably similar. If staff members tell you about their feelings, use your judgment about whether to let them know others feel the same. This can normalize their feelings and help reduce a sense of isolation that can come from social distancing, wearing masks and other PPE, and staying home as much as possible.

Consider using financial and non-monetary incentives when appropriate. They can boost low morale and reinforce desired behaviors.

Use web tools to deliver your messages

Make it easy for your target audience to get information on a regular basis. Share training videos or links to webinars in a Whatsapp group or on another web platform. For example, post video of a trusted source modeling how to wear an N95 mask.

Learn more about [The World Health Organization launches WHO Health Alert on WhatsApp](https://www.whatsapp.com/coronavirus/who) (https://www.whatsapp.com/coronavirus/who).

Prove new ideas before sharing widely

People may need time to feel comfortable with new ideas. First, identify your target group. Then consider using your new strategy with a small number of "early adopters" from the target group. Success among the early adopters will build confidence among other members of the target audience.

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Minnesota Department of Health | health.mn.gov | 651-201-5000
625 Robert Street North PO Box 64975, St. Paul, MN 55164-0975

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