

Wellness Tips for ED During COVID 19

COVID 19 has placed us under extreme conditions which may challenge how we function on a number of fronts. The health sector in particular may be tested by this disease, which could place health professionals in challenging positions both functionally and psychologically. Emergency departments are the front of our health services so may be exposed to more pressure and adverse situations than most, potentially impacting on individuals' levels of resilience. The ambiguity in this current situation can increase our general uncertainty and result in us feeling uneasy about the future, as well as where they're at currently.

There are some things that you can do to preserve your sanity over this period though. These have been grouped into how to take care of yourself, how to maintain care for the patients, and how to look after your whanau/team members. We'll talk about self-care first because you need to make sure you "put your own oxygen mask on first", and in that way you can be in the best space to look after others.

What can I do to make sure I take care of myself?

Issue: Failure to prioritise self-care. When you're under pressure or stress, one of the first things that generally tends to fall off are the things that maintain our resilience i.e. exercise, sleep, good nutrition etc. We also tend to shed our ability to recognise when we're under stress, making it tricky to know when we might need to increase what keeps us healthy. The end result of this is that we don't tend to prioritise our wellbeing when we're under pressure.



Solution. Give precedence to your exercise, nutrition, sleep, and down time. To do this, make a plan for how you are going to prioritise your wellness and when you are going to enact your plan. For example, when are you going to take a walk? What easy, healthy thing(s) are you going to make sure you have access to at work? When are you going to give yourself some 'you' time? Answering these questions and trying just 'one small thing' can make sure you prioritise healthy behaviours and ensure you have the ability to sustain your efforts over the long run. There are a few good resources out there (e.g. [5 ways to wellbeing](#)) so be proactive in looking them up or check out one-two things to do with your team at work/whanau at home.

Issue: Feeling boxed in: While humans tend to enjoy an amount of certainty in terms of knowing what's coming up, this tends to be balanced by our need to feel like we have control over things too. Too much of one or the other can lead to a drop in motivation/morale (too much certainty) or decision fatigue (too much control), so there needs to be a balance.

Solution. While there are things we have little control over (e.g. lockdown), there are some things we can exert control over e.g. you may not have much choice but to stay at home, **but** you do have control over **what** you do at home and **how** you do it. Others who have coped well in confining situations often used this 'reframing of situations' to remain positive in the face of extreme situations e.g. "I may have a limited choice in where I go right now, but I do have a choice in what I think about and how I do it.". Remind yourselves of the little things you do have control over/are grateful for and focus on these elements.

What can I do to make sure I take care of my whanau/ my team?

Issue: Irritability others/yourself: Again, this can be a product of losing that sense of autonomy or control given lockdown, and removal of choice can manifest itself in frustration and a 'shorter fuse' with others. Call it cabin fever (or whatever) it results in testy conversations/arguments, emotional 'discussions', and strained relationships at home and at work.



Solution. Anticipate that there will be something like this come up at some stage during this lockdown as it's kind of expected, particularly when we have our freedoms restricted over a period of time. Putting a plan in place to manage it can help guide us towards a more positive space. A plan could look like taking some time out when you're feeling wound up (e.g. [mindfulness](#)/deep breathing for five breaths while you scrub up), checking in with your mentor/peers, or writing in a journal at the end of the day. Also, identifying others/tasks at work that fill up your resilience bucket (rather than drain it) can be of help, as well as being compassionate to towards others (you may not have the full story of what's going on for them) and also yourself (a bit of [self-compassion](#)) can go a long way.

Issue: Losing track of where we are in the week: When we work a regular mon-fri (even if it's shifts over these days) we are given cues that a break is coming (e.g. the weekend) and that we've just experienced a break (e.g. the weekend!). Having these time-signals is something we tend to find useful as it gives us a sense of certainty which we like to work towards. If you've ever heard someone say "Can't wait for the weekend" or "Urrgh! It's only hump day!" you can start to see the value we place on these time-signals. But when these signals are disrupted (i.e. when you can only go to work and then straight home, can't do what you regularly do during the weekend e.g. sports, visit friends etc.) we can get into 'ground-hog day' situation where we feel like our energy is being drained away from us.

Solution. Humans love their routines and habits. We know that by creating and relying on habits we can feel like we have some control and we can feel like we know what's coming up next. Re-establishing a routine can help you re-gain your sense of certainty and autonomy, and can be easily achieved by doing one thing every day, at the same time, in the same order. For example, journal writing before you go to bed; walking the same route each day when you exercise; meditation etc. In addition, doing something at the end of your week/set of shifts (e.g. pancakes in the weekend) can replace that signal you've lost and highlight that something's over, and something's begun. This gives you the ability to be able to predict what's coming up next, promoting your sense of certainty and autonomy.

What can I do to make sure I give good care to my patients?

Giving good care to patients is about making good decisions given all available information and experience. That gets a little tricky when emotions are involved as we tend to make poor decisions when we aren't able to regulate these so well. So what might be the things that can interfere with good patient care and what can you do to mitigate them?



Issue: Empathy fatigue: to a degree medical professionals need to distance themselves emotionally from their patients in order to provide effective services and allocation of resources to their patients. That's a really useful mechanism to do your job effectively. In addition, during times like these we might find ourselves being asked to provide more emotional or psychological support to our patients, family, friends (ourselves??) than we normally do, particularly given the isolation others are in. The flip side of this is that you may inadvertently distance yourself from the support you need to feel like you're not drained emotionally. Even when you get home it may feel like you're always on duty. Normally you'd fill your bucket up with things you find relaxing or meaningful, but in the current situation that might prove a little tough.

Solution Distance yourself intelligently: this means taking *active* steps to separate work from home. So rather than letting the switch between mindsets happen coincidentally, you take control and determine when to start thinking about work or home when you want. Some people like to take the trip from/to home to start thinking about work/home and one or two things they want to

achieve when they get there, or what they're looking forward to. It might sound a little prescribed but this can give you back some control in terms of when you get to turn your head on and off, and gets you in the right headspace to greet the new context.

Given that your relationships with others can suffer at times like these when we feel isolated (physically and psychologically), you can combat this by thinking about how you might actively re-engage with those closest to you or who provide you support. This could be as simple as putting 30mins aside to write them an email, or making a rolling meeting over video-chat app. Either way, making sure you connect with your support networks (i.e. good social support) will be a key determining factor for your mental wellness.

Issue: The sprint at the start of the marathon: oftentimes people provide their skills (particularly if they're in health/ caring professions) willingly and in abundance at the start of national and global events e.g. Chch EQ. We love to feel needed and that we're adding value somehow. But, very few people can support this level of energy for long periods, and those who claim they can often do so with significant social consequence.

Solution. You may feel like you could work for three days straight right now but making sure you only 'turn the tap' half way means you'll have enough for the entire race. Even better, putting a 'timer' on your energy tap and planning when and where to put your emotional and resilience energy can a) give you greater choice and control (i.e. autonomy) and b) make it easier for you to make decisions about whether you should pick up that extra task or not. In essence though, what's important is to regulate your effort, emotions, and resilience so that it's not all spent up front and you're not sprinting during the start of the marathon.

Issue: Decisions about resources: Scarcity of resources is a fact of the context we're now placed in, and making those decisions about who gets what, when, and why can be challenging from an ethical, moral, and pragmatic perspective. Post event rumination is typical for educated and intelligent people, and so guilt may be something that comes up particularly if you aren't exposed to making definitive resource decisions *and* having to deal with the consequences of those decisions.

Solution. Talking these decisions over with colleagues or engaging your peer networks where possible can be an effective way to mitigate guilt associated with these decisions. Make time to talk things through with your peer network after your shift or making sure you have a regular contact with your mentor is another good way to go over your processes in a structured way. This is also a good way of leaving stuff at work.

Summary

Your ability to be adaptive in this demanding time will be determined by how well you can regulate your own emotions (and if you're a leader, others' emotions) and decisions during times of challenge. You and your whanau/team might be coping ok now, but to remain ahead of the curve you'll need to take active steps now (think of the known future benefit of physical distancing) in order to remain healthy in the future. By considering and tackling potential issues consciously (rather than problem solving on the fly) and combining solutions (e.g. establishing routines by walking/jogging the same route) you can get ahead of the curve and remain adaptive.

Dr Geoff Sutton

Psychologist

[Applied Human Performance NZ](#)