

# A Guide for Critical Care Nurses' Self-Management of Psychological and Mental Distress During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Dear Editor,

Healthcare professionals' and workers' mental and physical health and safety while providing effective and safe care during the Covid-19 pandemic are of paramount importance (WHO, 2020). Two major sources of distress in the general population, also evident in healthcare personnel, have been identified (Wang et al., 2020): (a) the fear of contracting Covid-19 and getting severely sick with it, and (b) restrictions due to Covid-19 preventive measures, for example, social distancing, strict quarantine, and so on. These stressors have variably affected people's psychological and mental health. Measures to augment their resilience need to be implemented before relevant symptoms deteriorate (Lai et al. 2020). Preventive measures, prescreening, and assessment for psychological and mental difficulties in regular

intervals, along with early supportive measures are proposed (Maben & Bridges, 2020).

Herein we report on a guide developed by the mental health research team of the Department of Nursing of the Cyprus University of Technology (Table 1). The focus of this guide is to and empower healthcare providers during the Covid-19 pandemic in Cyprus, and especially emergency and critical care personnel to self-manage the distress associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. The development was based on available evidence on (a) critical care nurses' distress during the Covid-19 pandemic (Blake et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2020), (b) cognitive-behavioral techniques (Alkhaldeh et al., 2020; Benhamou & Piedra, 2020), (c) previously published effective stress management interventions applied during Covid-19 pandemic (Hwang et al. 2020),

**TABLE 1. Guide for Self-Management of Psychological, Emotional, and Mental Distress by Healthcare Professionals in the Covid-19 Pandemic**

<b>Risk factors for psychological, mental, and emotional Covid-19-related distress</b>	<b>Psychological, mental, and emotional Covid-19-related distress responses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working in settings with direct contact with Covid-19 patients</li><li>• Lack of PPE</li><li>• Insufficient current information on SARS-CoV-2/ Covid-19 pandemic</li><li>• Inadequate training in the implementation of self-protection measures</li></ul>	Emotional disturbances: agony, tension, fear, despair, exhaustion, depressive feelings Psychological disturbances: helplessness, hopelessness, decreased personal and professional esteem Somatic problems: aches and back pains, fatigue Mental problems: sleep disturbances (insomnia), irritability, appetite dysregulation, decreased libido Cognitive alterations: disturbed attention and ability of concentration or decision-making

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**TABLE 1. Guide for Self-Management of Psychological, Emotional, and Mental Distress by Healthcare Professionals in the Covid-19 Pandemic (Continued)**

Dysfunctional thoughts associated with Covid-19-related distress	Interventions
<p>“I’m worried I might get infected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.”</p>	<p>A) Try to answer the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="751 380 1490 663"> <p><b>1. How likely do you think it is for you to get infected?</b>                      The chances of HPs to be infected by the virus are low if they apply precautionary measures, such as frequent hand washing/ hygiene, application of protective equipment (mask, gloves, protective glasses, etc.) and follow proper removal of work clothes; these measures must be applied in all cases of potential exposure to biological fluids and materials.</p> </li> <li data-bbox="751 674 1490 1073"> <p><b>2. What do you think may happen if you get infected by the virus?</b>                      Symptoms are usually mild to moderate and young, healthy individuals recover with no complications. <i>However, those having a systemic/chronic disease, such as asthma, diabetes mellitus, hypertension/coronary disease, high body mass index, age above 60, or any other risk factors SHOULD inform their service/supervisors of their risk factors and probably need special treatment, such as to work from home, or being shifted to safer environments.</i></p> </li> <li data-bbox="751 1083 1490 1367"> <p><b>3. If found SARS-CoV2 positive, what will happen if I am needed to a) self-quarantine, or b) be hospitalized?</b>                      a) Self-quarantine can be an awkward situation, especially when quarantining from the rest of the family is needed (see below), but it is not life-threatening. b) Even if hospitalized, the odds are in favour of a short and uneventful hospitalization, versus a prolonged one, with intubation and critical care involved.</p> </li> </ol> <p>B) Develop a plan in advance that prioritizes actions in case you get sick (whom to inform, how to go to the quarantine center, who will take on your roles at work and in the family, etc.).</p> <p>C) Try to find answers to the following questions from in valid source (Ministry of Health, World Health Organization, Center for Disease Control):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="751 1640 1490 1703"> <p><b>1. What is the severity of Covid-19 symptoms in people of your age who contract SARS-CoV-2?</b></p> </li> </ol>

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Dysfunctional thoughts associated with Covid-19-related distress	Interventions
“I’m worried that I might bring the virus to my family.”	<p><b>2. How many people have recovered from those infected?</b>            The majority of cases are mildly symptomatic. Beware of unconfirmed/unreliable information and of fake news circulating in social media.            D) Express your worries to your family members/significant others and ask them to express to you how they feel. Most of the times, externalization of fears and worries is associated with relief and calmness for all the members involved.</p> <p>A) Try to answer the following questions:</p> <p>1. <b>How likely is it for you to transmit the virus to your family?</b>            If precautionary measures are applied by both sides, the probability of transmission is very low.</p> <p>2. <b>Are there vulnerable members in your family?</b>            If the answer is Yes, educate your family members on how to apply preventive measures and PPE (masking, social distancing, hand washing/ hygiene, etc.) and forget to apply them to yourself, too.</p> <p>3. <b>If someone in the family gets sick, what will happen?</b>            Be informed of the appropriate actions if a family member of yours manifests symptoms and develop a plan prioritizing the needed actions (Who should be informed first? what should be done next?), and inform the whole family about this plan, as well as about the Covid-19 relevant symptoms. Early detection of Covid-19 symptoms leads to optimal management and decreases the probability of deterioration.</p> <p>B) If there are vulnerable members in the family, organize an action plan to keep yourself safely away from them.</p> <p>C) Always apply preventive measures and PPE in your workplace and proposed measures when indoors or outdoors</p> <p>D) Express your worries to family members/significant others and ask them to express how they feel. Most of the times externalization of fears and worries is associated with relief for all those involved.</p>

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**TABLE 1. Guide for Self-Management of Psychological, Emotional, and Mental Distress by Healthcare Professionals in the Covid-19 Pandemic (Continued)**

<b>Dysfunctional thoughts associated with Covid-19-related distress</b>	<b>Interventions</b>
<p>“I’m worried that I might transmit the virus to my colleagues.”</p>	<p>A) Try to answer the following question:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>“How likely is it for your colleagues to be infected by the virus from you rather than other sources?”</b></li> </ol> <p>Nevertheless, you must use PPE and self-protection measures such as frequent and proper hand washing/hygiene, masking, protective glasses, etc., as appropriate during working time and breaks.</p> <p>B) Educate your colleagues in the implementation of Covid -19 preventive measures and PPE use.</p> <p>C) Talk to your colleagues about your fears and ask them to express how they feel. Externalization of fears and agonies often leads to relief.</p>
<p>“I feel uncomfortable/ stigmatized because others/my family avoid me or may avoid me in the future due to concerns that I might transmit SARS-CoV-2 to them since I work in health-care.”</p>	<p>A) Try to answer the following question:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>“How have you come to this conclusion? Is there any chance that their reactions are due to other factors?”</b></li> </ol> <p>This is a difficult period for everyone, and it is possible that some family members will choose to isolate themselves for totally other reasons, e.g. to regroup themselves.</p> <p>B) It is also recommended to ask them what’s really going on, yet you must feel comfortable enough to do it. You must also ask this question with empathy and acceptance about their needs and priorities. It is also recommended to avoid accusations or criticism.</p> <p>C) Indeed, family members/friends may feel insecure and fearful, as you may feel as well. What your beloved ones probably need is to be destigmatized regarding their fear about you contracting them Covid-19, which most of the times is due to their need to protect themselves, rather than a rejection towards you.</p> <p>D) <b>2. Try to draw up a plan to protect each other within the family.</b></p> <p>An action plan will give everyone a sense of control, and is expected to reduce potential feelings of insecurity. Try to develop a plan jointly with family members ensuring everybody’s safety. Explore safe options for social contacts and clearly address relevant restrictions and optimal actions.</p>

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**TABLE 1. Guide for Self-Management of Psychological, Emotional, and Mental Distress by Healthcare Professionals in the Covid-19 Pandemic (Continued)**

<b>Dysfunctional thoughts associated with Covid-19-related distress</b>	<b>Interventions</b>
<p>“I am concerned that I do not have the appropriate knowledge to protect myself from the SARS-CoV-2.”</p>	<p>A) Get information from the following websites:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. CDC: What You Should Know About Coronavirus 2019 [<a href="https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fabout%2Findex.html">https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fabout%2Findex.html</a>]</li> <li>2. World Health Organization: Resources on Coronavirus [<a href="https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019">https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019</a>]</li> <li>3. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress: Coronavirus and Emerging Infectious Disease Outbreaks Response [<a href="https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response">https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response</a>]</li> </ol> <p>B) Ask your service leadership to inform and educate staff about precautions.</p> <p>C) Organize or propose 10-minute staff meetings at the beginning of the shift where the precautionary measures applied will be reevaluated/revised and the action plan updated.</p>
<p>“What if I cannot meet the requirements of care? What if I am not competent enough to manage other clinical scenarios than these we have been prepared for?”</p>	<p>A) Try to address your concerns to at least one person who is in a hierarchically superior position than you and ask him to draw up action plans based on the circumstances of your work environment and communicate them to your colleagues.</p> <p>B) Organize 15-minute staff meetings at the beginning of the shift where (a) action plans are reevaluated/reviewed in possible scenarios and (b) experiences are exchanged.</p> <p>C) Try to participate in tele-meetings that you will organize with colleagues where you will express your concerns in a climate of acceptance and trust.</p>
<p>“What is it that I feel? How long is this going to last?” and “I hesitate to touch the door handle or put the phone on my ear, etc. Have I become phobic?”</p>	<p>A) Recognize that the following responses are anticipated during a pandemic: anxiety, agony, tension, fear, despair, sleep disturbances (insomnia), irritability, physical pain, fatigue, decreased appetite, decreased libido, decreased ability to concentrate, difficulty in making decisions, decreased self-esteem, pessimism.</p>

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Dysfunctional thoughts associated with Covid-19-related distress	Interventions
“I don’t want to go to work, I want to protect myself.”	<p>B) It is important to remind yourself that this is an unprecedented situation in which the above responses are anticipated and most likely will have a short duration.</p> <p>C) If the above responses persist for a period of more than 5 weeks, affect your quality of life or hinder you from fulfilling your roles (professional, social, family), then:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Talk to your family and supervisors.</li> <li>2. Seek support from mental health professionals.</li> </ol> <p>A) Such thoughts are expected, because the self-preservation instinct is inherent in the human nature.</p> <p>B) Remind yourself that, although you are a healthcare professional, above all you are a human being experiencing an unprecedented situation. Feelings of fear are normal and acceptable.</p> <p>C) Recognize your fear as a useful feeling that reminds you that you must remain vigilant regarding appropriate measures to protect yourself and others.</p> <p>D) Reward yourself for the important work you offer, as well as your colleagues.</p>

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and (d) anecdotal data on the distressing experiences in midwives and emergency and critical care nurses employed in Covid-19 units in Cyprus. However, this guide does not address the topic of moral distress, which is associated with care rationing and prioritizing challenges faced by healthcare staff during the Covid-19 pandemic. Evidence-based recommendations to manage moral distress in healthcare personnel have been published elsewhere (Morley et al., 2020).

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