**A Practical Road Map to Increasing Personal, Professional, and Team Resilience in Challenging Times of COVID.**

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Working in today’s medical environment means sitting next to and putting ourselves in the middle of stress, crisis, grief and more. The fields of hospice and palliative care have defined compassion fatigue, secondary or vicarious trauma, and burnout as consequences we will likely experience throughout our careers. In fact, compassion fatigue is a normal consequence of working in these fields which can be mitigated. We also know that the level of our own personal anxiety or stress can contribute to compassion fatigue and secondary trauma. These factors will impact not only how we do our work and how we manage our own stress, but also how we can increase resilience going forward and throughout our careers. Given the immense changes in healthcare over the last few months, it is a good time to consider strategies for increasing our resilience to deal with common, but distressing, reactions that are inevitable in our work and heightened in a crisis. These tips provide an implementation road map to enhance self-awareness around creating real-time strategies to navigate stress.

1. **Take inventory of your personal reaction styles to reveal your own strength and weaknesses.** We already have skills, strategies and coping styles that we use in our work that help us be resilient, bounce back from difficult days, cases, interactions. During a time of increased distress, it is important to remind ourselves and recognize when we are moving from a normal reaction to something that is more challenging or experiencing compassion fatigue or secondary trauma. Distressing reactions can build and cause harm. [1](#_ENREF_1) It is crucial to understand our physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions so that we can manage those feelings, learn from them, and take the best care of our patients and ourselves. Identifying our own warning signs will allow us to tend to those reactions more effectively, and build on our existing coping strategies. This exercise can help us uncover our reactions and physical responses, which we can then use as our warning signs. By recognizing warning signs, we can change our reaction, behavior, and interactions.[2](#_ENREF_2)

Using Figure 1, complete this brief exercise:

**Take an inventory of how you react in a crisis:**  Identify and list your **most frequent 3 responses in the 3 categories of physical, behavioral and emotional reactions**. How do you physically feel,(i.e. exhaustion, racing heart); behavioral (do you get irritable or angry); and emotional (do you feel defeated, frustrated, guilty). All of the above? It doesn’t matter what they are; the exercise helps you identify your reactions which in turn will help you know when you need to slow down or need help. It will be helpful to write it down, and use it to keep track of where you are during the day or week. If a good, regular day is in the green zone, consider what a yellow or red zone day or time might look like? How would you know?

1. **Pause several times per day to check in with yourself** about how you are feeling. Self-awareness has been noted as a key strategy for resilience.[3](#_ENREF_3) Taking time to note how you are feeling throughout the day is a basic tenant of mindfulness and helps us better understand the relationship between feelings and thoughts[4](#_ENREF_4). This method is central to psychological first aid as an immediate way to refocus the mind. We all experience cognitive distortions, such as catastrophizing, from time to time and not attending to the outcomes that we can control may over time increase levels of anxiety and depression. Taking time to manage these thoughts will allow us to be present and consider other possible outcomes may exist. This self-check-in, or noting technique, can be both preventative (identifying when you need a break) and therapeutic (the act of pausing gives your mind some space to process a situation or emotion).

**Implementation strategy:** Integrate a routine check in times during the day. You can use Figure 1 as a place to record For instance, pause each time you wash your hands or reach for your office door handle. Slow down, take a deep breath, and simply notice how you feel. Avoid judgement and negative self-thoughts; just notice your feelings and thoughts then move on to your next task. This mindfulness exercise can help you take note of how we are physically and emotionally managing. Only by regularly paying attention will we acknowledge our distress instead of ignoring it.

1. **Adapt your self care strategies.** Having a fixed notion of what we need for self-care may lead to frustration in this time of immense change. Ask yourself: Do my strategies need to change due to a crisis, schedule, different roles, or new responsibilities? If your current strategies are not succeeding, you’ll need to adapt. You may feel so overwhelmed your usual strategies are not as effective as usual.

**Implementation strategy:** When a change is needed, start with the least difficult strategy and add something to your daily routine (see Table 1). Set yourself up for success by choosing something that is easy to do and follow. In times of crisis, there can be immense value in returning to what has worked for us in the past, fundamental self care such as eating well and getting enough sleep. Whether a new or time-tested strategy, make a small change and adapt as needed. Consider which of the strategies in Table 1 you can commit to implementing this week.

1. **Create a transition routine between work and home**. Creating a routine that signifies the beginning and end of your work day provides structure and promotes balance for work and home.[5](#_ENREF_5) No matter how small or dramatic it may be, a daily routine for starting your day and finishing can be enormously helpful in allowing space and time outside of working. In a crisis, this routine will likely be challenged and need revision, even daily. There may be some days when the transition isn’t possible but having a routine is helpful for many people.

**Implementation strategies:** You can change your shoes before entering your home, use the drive home to think through the day and refocus on other things, or light a candle when you arrive home. Since many of us are working from home, using different home spaces for professional work and personal time offers the opportunity to create a transition routine at the end of the work day. Although you are at home, changing into work clothes, following your typical morning routine before beginning to work is one example. Deciding on a time that you will stop checking your work email at the end of the day can also work as a transition back to “home”.

1. **Use debriefings as a strategy for your colleagues and teams:** Debriefings are effective**;** and they build resilience[6-8](#_ENREF_6). It is important to have the opportunity to “off load” intense experiences, emotions, thoughts, as a way of gaining control and understanding. Using debriefings to deal with moral distress has been found to add to nursing resilience[9](#_ENREF_9). Peer validation, social support, and normalizing are important coping strategies, especially in a crisis when we may be hyper-critical of ourselves. Debriefings are one way to offer these strategies that are flexible and portable for any setting.

**Implementation strategy:** Schedule weekly team debriefs. Standard implementation of debriefings includes having a facilitator provide guidelines and reinforce confidentiality and expectations for participants. Whether scheduled or spontaneous, leaders can use debriefings to pay attention to reactions, foster space, and enable individuals to increase their awareness and implement possible interventions. Those using debriefings in a crisis or *trauma situation* should be cautious, limiting the details of the trauma to avoid retraumatizing those listening.

1. **Check your ‘Window of Tolerance’:** During a time of crisis or repeated exposure to trauma, our ability to tolerate stress will vary.[10](#_ENREF_10) We will not always be in the place where we feel in control, where expectations seem clear, and where life feels predictable. Experiencing too many emotions, fears, or expectations can ultimately lead to us becoming numb and disconnected. The idea of a ‘Window of Tolerance’ helps us diagnose our reactions and current capabilities. This information can then inform how we tend to those reactions, give language to unconscious feelings, and guide interventions.[10](#_ENREF_10) Implementing strategies regularly and in a state of calm can be effective for learning what works well for you as an individual.

**Implementation strategy:** Ask yourself: how is my window of tolerance today? Am I feeling numb or in “fight” mode? Limit judgement about where you are. You should not feel guilty about where you are. Paying attention to how you are currently coping will give you insight into what you need to widen your window of tolerance.

1. **Pay attention to your personal triggers**: PC and Hospice clinicians must understand their personal issues that can be triggered by the work we do with patients, families, and colleagues[11](#_ENREF_11). Acknowledging the general notion of emotional triggers is not enough as many manifest as a vague feeling. We may not be able to resolve past issues but must seek out understanding of our triggers so we can understand them whenever possible. These unconscious or conscious reactions will inform your attitude, word choice, perspective, interventions, and more.

**Implementation strategy:** Note when interactions with patients, families, or colleagues leave you feeling uneasy. Ask yourself what is it about his case, this interaction or emotion contributing to the unease. These triggers will happen over and over. The goal is not to rid ourselves of these, but to understand how they impact our work.[11](#_ENREF_11)

1. **Be kind & patient towards yourself and others.** Compassion for other means starting with compassion for yourself. Compassion for yourself begins with recognizing and attending to our own fears and feelings, as noted above. This concept can easily be translated for those that are leading teams and individuals to finding peace within themselves.

**Implementation strategy:** Either through observation or by asking, seek to understand how colleagues deal with distress. The act of simply checking in (How are you doing today?) conveys collegial support and connection. This curiosity allows us to be open minded, which can lead to healthier interactions. Interprofessional education has achieved a lot in this arena, helping us all to discover different curriculums, ethical constructs, and increase our empathy and understanding of those we work with so closely.[12](#_ENREF_12)

1. **This is not all on your shoulders**. Managing compassion fatigue and building resilience takes intention by you, your team and your institution. You are not soley responsible for managing stress. Your team and institution also have a responsibility to provide resources, opportunities and strategies to help.

**Implementation strategy**: Use any/all of the above exercise and strategies in a team setting; present to your institution as possible guides.

Working in healthcare is difficult and is getting harder as the pandemic wears on. We must develop intentional strategies to mitigate job and personal stress and their more menacing cousins. We encourage everyone to use the list above as a roadmap for choosing and implementing tested strategies that can help to minimize our own suffering, as we work tirelessly to minimize the suffering of our patients and colleagues.

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**Figure 1: Crisis Reaction Inventory and Check-in Tool**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Domains | Most Common Reaction | Second Most Common | Third Most Common |
| Physical | ­­­ |  |  |
| Behavioral |  |  |  |
| Emotional |  |  |  |

**Check in(s): Color now (G/Y/R):**

Arrival to work: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Midday: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Heading/arriving home: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Late evening: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Table 1: Easily Implemented Self-Care Strategies**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Easily Implemented Self-Care Strategies** | **Possible Barriers** | **Benefits** |
| Get enough sleep | We get overinvested in our work and feel we must work harder in order to be productive. | Being rested helps us cope better, increases our patience, and offers the ability to see possibilities. |
| Take 5-15 minutes for yourself each day by unplugging | We can feel we are omnipotent and can’t pull ourselves away from work. | Giving yourself “space” to relax; thinking of something unrelated to work can be refreshing and add to our strength. |
| Exercise 20-30 minutes per day | We often feel like we don’t have enough time or feel too tired or ‘spent’ to move around. | Moving our bodies for a bit, especially if we don’t at work, increases energy and can help with sleep. |
| Be aware of your stress level | We can be so focused on issues outside of ourselves that we miss what we can control. | Monitoring yourself will allow you to respond to yellow moments before they turn red! |
| Eat breakfast or pack lunch | It is faster to order take out and carbohydrates and processed sugars taste great! | Eating a good breakfast (something with protein) can fuel you through lunch. Packing lunch offers portion control and healthier options. |

**Table 2: Resilience Toolkit**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **A Resilience ToolBox** | | | |
| **Suggestion** | **When to practice** | **Example** | **Challenges** |
| Identify and create a **stress warning system** for yourself. Write down how you react to stress/crisis and name your top 3 reactions. Use these as your warning system. | 15 minutes. End of the day, individually or in a group; revisit monthly, has anything changed? | You have identified that your heart races, you withdraw from the conversation and feel frozen. These are your warning signs to pay attention to. When you feel these starting think about what could be helpful to mitigate (not rid) the reactions to allow yourself to be present. | We have a tendency to ignore our reactions, thinking we can just “tough it out” or feel shame that we have reactions. |
| Pay attention to your **personal issues** that get triggered in conversations and interactions. | This is an ongoing practice and skill used throughout your career. This self awareness is particularly helpful during a case that is causing you distress.  Helpful to write these down, journal. Debriefings are also a venue for discussion. | You didn’t get to say goodbye to your grandmother; you had things you wanted to say and feel guilty this didn’t happen. When a family chooses not to be present at a death, you feel very angry with them. | It is easy to avoid our own issues and project them onto others. “That family made me so mad. They should want to be present at the time of death”. This work can stir painful memories and requires intention. |
| Check your **basics**:  Eating, sleeping, play | During a crisis, or stressful times, we can often forget to eat right, get enough sleep. While they are basic, they are fundamental for being able to manage stress effectively. | Be intentional about your meals, what you eat and taking time. Be sure and get enough sleep each night, reschedule your routine to accommodate this self-care. | We have less time; preoccupation with daily crisis situations; ignoring warning signs; build to overwhelming fatigue. |
| Create a **transition routine** between work and home | Decide how you want to mark the beginning and end of your work day. Make sure there is a beginning and an end. | Set aside 15 minutes in the morning to sit outside before checking phone and email. Turn your phone off at end of work day and spend 15 min reading. | Work can become 24/7, especially during a crisis when things change daily. |

Available resources:

**Mindfulness**

Free mindfulness apps

https://blog.calm.com/take-a-deep-breath

<https://www.headspace.com/health-covid-19>

Free access to the headspace mindfulness app for health care professionals with a valid NPI number

Tara Brach - Guided Meditation - The RAIN of Self Compassion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm1t5FyK5Ek>

**Podcast:**

<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/introducing-unlocking-us/>

**Compassion Fatigue & Secondary Trauma**

Tend Academy Tendacademy.ca

Trauma Stewardship traumastewardship.com

**Articles:**

Meditation in Depth

<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation-in-depth>

Five Exercises to Calm our Body’s Stress Response and Restore Resilience

<https://kripalu.org/resources/five-exercises-calm-our-bodys-stress-response-and-restore-resilience>

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