

11 Psychological Tips for Frontline Staff

The challenges for frontline staff working during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic are significant. You are not only serving the community but you also trying to stay healthy, while often worrying about the health of family and friends. This document describes 11 practical psychological skills to help front line staff stay mentally resilient during this challenging time.

Best wishes,

The MindSpot Clinic Team

1. Be respectful and kind to yourself

You are working under challenging circumstances: Things may be changing rapidly, you may be working with colleagues and serving members of the public who are anxious and frightened, and you may be worrying about your own health and that of your loved ones.

All of these things make doing your job difficult, stressful and exhausting. One of the most important techniques for staying resilient at times of crisis is to treat yourself the way you would treat others; that is, with respect and with kindness.

Being kind to yourself means recognising that you are human and can only do your best. Remember that stress is normal and no one is perfect. Being respectful to yourself means treating yourself in the same way that you treat others.

For other information about psychological health, including free assessments and treatment, visit mindspot.org.au

For daily resilience tips, visit our Facebook page: facebook.com/MindSpotClinic

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2. Practice switching on and off

We are all 'wired' to stay vigilant to threats; this important skill helps us to keep safe and stay alive. But, during crises our 'risk radar' become too sensitive and hard to 'switch off', which can make things worse.

Practice your routines for turning your radar on and off, including the following after work routine:

- Write your to-do list for tomorrow
- Turn off news and social media
- Change out of your clothes
- Listen to a piece of your favourite music
- Change your body state by either exercising for a few minutes or practice 2-3 minutes of slow controlled breathing to relax
- Remind yourself to be 'present' in your daily life by focusing on what you are doing with others or your other activities
- Get some exposure to sunlight

Before starting work switch your radar back on by doing the following:

- Catch up on news and work messages
- Put on your fresh work clothes
- Update your to-do list

Make switching on and off part of your daily work routine.

3. Practice psychological safety

Working on the front-line means seeing and hearing things which are confronting. We naturally want to 'fix' things for people and 'make it right'. But we can't always do that, and we need to make sure that we don't become overwhelmed with distress. This means keeping boundaries between our personal and professional lives. You can still be kind and gentle with people, but stay psychologically safe by:

- Remember that you are not your job; you have a life outside of work
- Remember your role at work and staying within that role. If someone needs more help than you can provide, then take steps to refer them to a more appropriate service
- Recognise when you are over-identifying with a client and avoid sharing too much about your personal life, or assuming that you know what they are going through
- Regularly de-brief with colleagues and supervisors
- Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can in difficult circumstances and that you can't 'fix' everything
- Take regular breaks during the shift, so that you clear and refresh your 'head'
- Practice switching on and off (see above)

Remember you are not your role; stay resilient by staying psychologically safe.

4. Do the things that help you to re-charge

When stressed we tend to avoid doing things that we normally do, including things which keep us resilient. We all have activities and hobbies which we enjoy, and which give us pleasure. Even if we can't do those things in exactly the same way due to limited time, energy, or other reasons, it is essential you make time and effort to do things that you find valuable, meaningful and fun. If possible, try and do these with others. Planning to do at least one enjoyable and relaxing thing each day will give you something to look forward to, which is a key strategy for staying mentally healthy during times of crisis.

5. Stop the noise but choose your news

Give yourself permission to switch off 'noise' such as social media, news, and radio. These media often try to bait you with extreme headlines which trigger stress and anxiety. You can also switch off noise by avoiding people who create stress.

Keep checking in to reliable news sources once or twice a day, but otherwise, turn down the noise. Instead, replace it with things that can help you stay grounded, including doing things you enjoy, listening to music, entertainment and games.

6. Keep your routine

We all have routines in our daily lives. Some are as simple as brushing our teeth, while others are more complex. Our emotional health is strongly affected by regular routines; these routines not only help to get us organized but give us a sense of achievement and accomplishment. Some of our routines involve other people, who also benefit from them. Crises often create changes in routines, particularly if we can't do some of our usual activities. Spend some time thinking about the routines that are important to you and modify these routines in a such a way that you can keep doing them, even during challenging times.

7. Get good sleep

We all need to get good sleep, but this can be hard after a long stressful day. Things that help include:

- Keep a regular bedtime routine to help maintain regular sleep cycles
- Write down your to-do list of things and keep it next to your bed in case you think of something urgently at night
- Start your bedtime routine at least one hour before you go to sleep: Switch off devices, change clothes, wash, toilet, and start to physically relax by doing something calming
- If you are looking after others, get them into a similar routine, so that everyone feels settled
- Make sure the room sufficiently dark, with no devices on, and cool to promote good sleep

Remember that:

- It is normal to have difficulty sleeping in the first few weeks of a crisis; it might be unpleasant, but you will survive
- Only use aides like sleeping pills or melatonin in the short term and in consultation with your GP
- Good sleep routines take at least a week to develop and may need to be tweaked

8. Permission to be human

It is normal to experience many different emotions when working on the front line, these include anger, fear, frustration, guilt, joy, euphoria, sadness, shame, terror, happiness, confusion, exhaustion, helplessness, tearfulness, etc. Sometimes you might feel all those emotions in the same day.

The context for these emotions is important: Not only are you delivering a service, but you are doing so under challenging circumstances, sometimes to people who may not be grateful, or who may themselves be distressed. In addition, you may be worried about your own health and the health of colleagues, friends, and loved ones.

Having strong emotions is not a sign that you aren't coping or a weak; they are a sign that you are human. Your colleagues will be feeling the same. Given yourself permission to have those feelings. By recognizing your emotions, you can decide how you will respond. By naming your emotions you can process them in as helpful a way as possible, recognizing that the situation is unusual, but your reactions are part of being human.

9. Balance your thoughts

It is normal for front line staff to notice that they have more negative thoughts than positive thoughts. Thoughts like, "How will I cope if I get sick?", "I can't deal with this", are normal. These thoughts reflect our worries and are usually temporary. But, these thoughts can stop you doing things that can help. Remember, our thoughts are not always true or helpful. Challenge your negative thoughts by asking yourself what a friend would say in the same situation, or ask yourself what evidence do you have that you 'won't cope or can't cope'? Whenever you recognize a negative thought balance it with a realistic thought.

10. Lead by example

Do not underestimate the impact of your actions on those around you. People will be looking for strength in those around them. Whether you are a junior member of your team or the CEO, be a leader in times of crises. Act in a way that inspires others and gives them confidence. Be respectful, calm, and kind. When appropriate, be vulnerable and show that it is okay to be human. Act in a way that, when you look back at this event, you will be quietly proud of your actions.

11. Keep looking forward

Remember the famous saying, 'this too shall pass'. It may not feel like it, but things will return to normal. In the meantime, it is important to have confidence that things will improve, that people will recover, and things will get back to normal. In addition to maintaining your long-term goals, also think about things that you will look forward to each day and week, which you can and will enjoy and will maintain your hope for the future.

Please Note: If you require urgent assistance please call Lifeline on **13 11 14**, or in an emergency, call the emergency services on **000**.

Want to know more?

Please don't hesitate to contact us with questions:

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