

## Managing self-care: The impact of delivering bad news and having difficult conversations on staff well-being during the Coronavirus pandemic

Talking about death and dying with patients and families can be difficult at any time. However, delivering bad news and having difficult conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic can be even more challenging. This may be because:

- There are increased pressures and stressors at work
- You may feel outside of your comfort zone within your clinical role
- The impact of isolation and not being able to have face-to-face conversations with family members
- You may be worrying about your own health, and the health of your family and friends
- You may feel drained, emotionally and physically, because of the on-going situation.

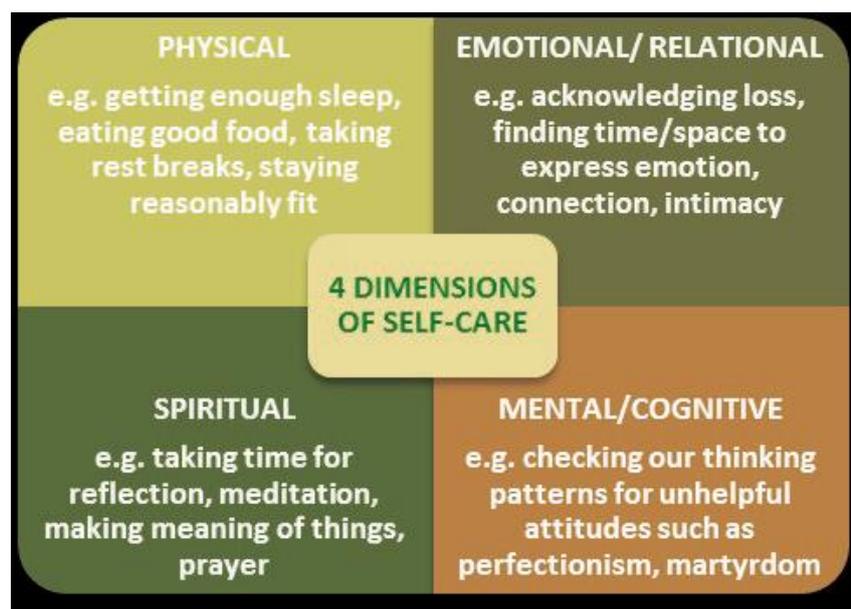
You may be experiencing a range of emotions, such as sadness, frustration, hopelessness or a sense of feeling out of control. It can be helpful to note:

- You are not immune to grief
- It is important to take care of yourself in order to be effective and resilient in your work
- You need to be aware of your own approach to loss and to death
- You need to have a sense of what draws you to your work and what you get out of it
- You need a safe place to process your own feelings
- You need to have a sense of what helps you to stay healthy and happy

### Self-Care

The first step is to be kind to yourself.

Self-care has a wide definition, meaning not simply physical care (such as the exercise and diet) but also emotional wellbeing, which may include hobbies and interests, meditation, developing resilience and ensuring good personal relationships at home and at work. It can be helpful to think about self-care within the four contexts shown.



Consider ways that you might address some of these items. Here are some suggestions of things that you might try, both within and outside of the workplace.

### **Within your workplace or after your time at work:**

- What feelings come up for you when you think over the conversations you had with the patient? Try and think about where these feelings may be coming from? What are they related to?
- Reflect on your conversations and think about what went well. You may also want to think about what perhaps could go differently next time. Be mindful of any 'critical voice' you may have, which may place expectations on how you should cope and feel. Everyone copes in their own way and at their own pace. So give yourself a break.
- There may be opportunity to debrief with colleagues or your manager about your work with patients who are dying. Talking to others within your team can be helpful.
- Call a 'time out' (usually, a few minutes is enough) as a way of dealing with emotional flooding after a traumatic event—for example, tell your colleagues that you need to take a five-minute walk or break.
- Take opportunities to draw on mindfulness techniques during your day. For instance, as you walk from your car to your workplace or through the corridors of your workplace, attend carefully to the sensation of contact between your feet and the ground. Between patients, pause and bring your attention to the sensation of your breathing for 2 to 5 breaths.

### **Away from work**

- Take the time to look after yourself. Try to eat healthily and drink plenty of water. Getting out in the fresh air and exercising where possible will be beneficial and aid better sleep.
- Try and keep to a regular daily routine as much as possible, and include time to relax.
- Think about what activities are the best distraction for you; this might include watching TV, reading, engaging in exercise, hobbies, or setting yourself achievable tasks at home, such as household jobs or gardening.
- Try and maintain communication with friends and family. You may not be able to do this in person, but try using email, telephone or videocalls.
- Take regular breaks from the news and social media, and ensure that your sources for information are trustworthy.
- Mindfulness or breathing exercises can be helpful ways of managing stress and getting in touch with the moment. Try a quick breathing exercise, or refer to the websites below. Once familiar with these techniques, you may be able to draw on these within your clinical practice.

A link for NHS staff to freely access a range of wellbeing apps

<https://www.nhsemployers.org/news/2020/03/free-access-to-wellbeing-apps-for-all-nhs-staff>

Adapted from The Irish Hospice Foundation <https://hospicefoundation.ie/>