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# Emotional Distress During the Pandemic

## How to Help Patients Cope

BY LIBBY ZAY

**OUR EXPERT**

Vivian Schutz, PhD, MBA, RN, assistant professor

Even for those who have not contracted COVID-19, the stress of the ongoing pandemic is taking a toll on health. In the online article “How to Manage COVID-19-Related Emotional Distress” in *American Nurse*, the journal of the American Nurses Association, in July, Vivian Schutz, PhD, MBA, RN, UMSON assistant professor, and Mona Shattell, PhD, RN, FAAN, associate dean for faculty development and Isabel Hampton Robb Distinguished Scholar, Johns Hopkins School of Nursing, pointed to an increase in sleep problems, depression, despair, poor mental health, and even suicide worldwide.

The pair said that during the pandemic, paying attention to mental health is of critical importance. “With no clear end in sight for coronavirus, the mental health of patients cannot rest on the backburner,” they wrote.

Patients and their families need emotional and mental health support, and nurses can positively impact these aspects of health and wellness through their interactions and communication – even if those interactions are brief. Below are a few tips for all providers to help support their patients.

### 3 Inspire patients to take care of their body and mind.

Physical activity, good quality and quantity of sleep, relaxation exercises, and a healthy diet can help relieve stress, as can taking time to unplug to avoid being overwhelmed with information.

Keep in mind that nurses are not immune to emotional stress, either. You may be working longer hours without adequate resources or protection; be concerned about your own loved ones’ safety; or be confronted with illness, suffering, or death. Schutz and Shattell have a message for caregivers: “Managing your mental health and psychosocial well-being during this pandemic is the key. If not, how can you help patients and families?”

### 1 Share precise and clear information.

There is a lot of misinformation about COVID-19 that circulates. Share simple facts related to risk reduction and infection in comprehensible words for those who may have barriers in understanding. Be warm, open, and relaxed. Repeat information when needed.

### 2 Encourage patients to reach out and stay in touch with loved ones.

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**On the Upside**

Schutz and Shattell hope that telehealth practices will continue post-pandemic. This method of health care delivery increases access to care for all, and since it’s available in the privacy of the home, it can reduce the stigma of seeking care for emotional distress or mental illness.



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