

SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS EXPOSED TO COVID-19

U.S. healthcare workers, including clinicians as well as custodial, laboratory, food services, transport, and other hospital staff, are on the front lines of caring for the surge of COVID-19 patients across the country. Contact with COVID-19 patients, media reports questioning the availability of personal protective equipment, and news stories of healthcare workers becoming ill with COVID-19, understandably increase concerns of healthcare workers about contracting the virus or spreading it among family members. This may be especially true

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when members of the family have preexisting or compromising medical conditions. Children who do not understand what is happening may become frightened and need greater reassurance from parents. Whether due to long work hours or infection control precautions, healthcare workers may be separated from their families,

which can add to family distress due to physical separations or infrequent communication. Below are several strategies to help families.

Family Distress

- Remember that distress is an understandable feeling in such circumstances.
- Employ calming strategies and maintain family routines.
- Ensure there is time for rest and “stepping away” when possible in order to “recharge”.
- Remember that even if stressful, the situation is temporary.
- Highlight those things you have control over in your life where you can make a positive difference.
 - » Take care of your health by keeping regular bedtime hours and eating well.
 - » Ensure your physical resilience by avoiding excessive alcohol, and by not smoking or vaping.

Helping Families Feel Safe

- Families of healthcare workers may be given conflicting or unclear information about the best ways to avoid COVID-19 infection. Information provided by reliable sources, such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or the World Health Organization (WHO) are most useful.

- Worry less about being perfect in your actions, and manage as best you can considering the circumstances, your resources, and available information.
- Specific rules and guidance may not be provided for every situation. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to develop your own family “rules” and procedures that help families feel safe in managing exposures.
 - » Ensure you cover the basics. Maintain proper hygiene practices (e.g., regularly washing hands, covering when coughing and sneezing, avoiding contact with your face, cleaning commonly touched surfaces and door knobs).
 - » You may choose or be guided to take additional precautions (e.g., removing work clothes at the door, showering before engaging family members).
 - » Promote these practices in an effective manner for children (e.g., singing songs, creating games).
- Work together (include family members and employers) to decide best living arrangements (e.g., separate bedrooms or temporarily living away) to support family safety.

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Family Separations and Long Work Hours

- Remind all family members that the healthcare worker is involved in a critical “mission”, similar to a military deployment, which can help put the worker’s and family’s roles in context.
- Be proud of your family member’s role in taking care of COVID-19 patients during this outbreak. This pride creates a sense of meaning and purpose among family members.
- Maintain telephonic or online communication when possible, but understand their time may be limited.
- Remember that healthcare workers may separate from the family in order to ensure everyone’s well-being, but it will only be temporary.
- Work together within the family to deal with daily challenges and overcome larger difficulties, building a sense of family purpose.
- Take advantage of assistance that is offered from neighbors, friends, and extended family — you are strong, but you don’t have to go it alone.

Children

- Help children understand what is happening within their family.
- Remind children that their family healthcare worker is properly trained for this situation. They know what to do to treat COVID-19 patients and to ensure their own safety and the safety of their family.
- Give children a sense of purpose by providing opportunities “to contribute” within the home (i.e., helping with food preparation, cleaning the dishes, completing other family chores).

For specific information about communicating with children about COVID-19 see Additional Resources listed at the end of this fact sheet.

Additional Resources

Discussing Coronavirus with Your Children fact sheet

https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Discussing_Coronavirus_w_Your_Children.pdf

Finding the Right Words to Talk with Children and Teens about Coronavirus fact sheet

https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Finding_Right_Words_Talk_Children_Teens_Coronavirus.pdf