

## **Caring for our Caregivers: Helping the Healthcare Workforce Cope with the Impact of COVID-19**

*By Dr. Emily Ptaszek, PsyD, ABPP, CEO Healthcare Network*

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, we often refer to our healthcare workers as heroes. As we express our genuine respect and appreciation, we must not lose sight of the fact that heroes are humans with limitations.

Heroism comes with risks. Like our nation's soldiers and veterans, physicians, healthcare workers and first responders function well in a crisis. Sometimes the emotional and psychological danger doesn't emerge until the crisis is over. Sometimes the emotional and psychological demands simply exceed one's resources mid-crisis. The point is this: the time to be watchful and engage in preparatory action is right now.

COVID-19 is a prolonged stressor. The pandemic has the capacity to challenge professional identity, our most important relationships, and our sense of what is fundamentally meaningful. We also have much yet to learn about any long-term physiological impacts to the brain and nervous system, and how this may influence mental health over time.

In this current crisis, our physician and healthcare workers have little time process what is happening as they are focused on caring for others. They don't have the option of working from home, and some of them don't feel they can even go home, for fear of exposing their families to the virus. Levels of burnout and moral injury were already high before the pandemic. This is now a crisis on top of an already tenuous state of affairs in healthcare.

While no one is completely immune to the many biopsychosocial impacts of COVID-19, the need to respond to our healthcare workforce is especially critical, because the recovery efforts of communities everywhere will depend upon it. It's a time to be collectivistic – we either heal together or not at all. If we take our lessons from the veterans of almost every war, we will appreciate the following:

- 1) Resilience doesn't happen by accident; it can be built and nurtured – by individuals, systems and communities.
- 2) Avoidance increasingly fails us over time as a coping strategy, yet it can be the one thing in the moment that makes us feel safe.
- 3) Those who recover well seek support, ask for help early, and engage in repeated self-care.
- 4) It's exceptionally hard for leaders, helpers and healers to ask for help – we must work on making it easier

Organizations everywhere can have an impact. We are so fortunate in this community to have leaders and changemakers who are always willing to come to the table on difficult issues, and this will be no different. We need to develop strategies to consistently promote help-seeking and self-care behaviors and remove systemic barriers where they exist.

At Healthcare Network, we deliver primary healthcare in an integrated model to ensure both physical and mental health are taken into account when caring for our patients. Our teams include both medical providers as well as clinical psychologists to promote a collaborative approach to healthcare that focuses on the whole person. Now more than ever, integration in healthcare systems will be critical to meeting the needs of our front-line caregivers.

Beginning Tuesday, May 19, Healthcare Network will host a series of virtual conversations tailored to local and regional healthcare workers who may wish to discuss reactions, coping strategies, and resilience building related to COVID-19.

Visit our website, [www.healthcareswfl.org](http://www.healthcareswfl.org) for more information on these virtual discussions.

**About the Author**

Dr. Emily Ptaszek is President and CEO of Healthcare Network; prior to entering healthcare leadership, she previously worked as a psychologist at the Department of Veterans Affairs specializing in PTSD.