

Protecting Mental Health When Working in Aged Care: Tips for Aged Care Managers

Why we need this tip sheet

The National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) conducts research in aged care. During the pandemic, we have heard many stories about aged care workers being stressed and anxious because they are having to deal with things they don't usually have to deal with. We looked to see if there was any research on this. There wasn't any in Australia but there was some research from other parts of the world that supported what we were hearing – front line health and aged care workers and their managers are experiencing lots of stress and anxiety because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is affecting their wellbeing.

For this reason, the team at NARI (including psychologists and social workers with expertise in mental health), with help from our aged care partners, has developed a series of tip sheets. This one is about what aged care managers can do to support the mental wellbeing of you and your staff during COVID-19. Please refer to the tip sheet called Tips for Aged Care Workers for advice for aged care workers as this may also apply to you.

This tip sheet does not replace professional psychological or psychiatric help. Services that can provide professional assistance are listed at the end of this tip sheet.

Who is this tip sheet for?

This tip sheet is for people in management or supervisory roles in aged care.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people in these roles have dealt with things they do not usually have to deal with. Many may also feel isolated and under extra pressure during this time, with increased difficulties managing procedures to reduce risk of infection to clients, residents, staff and themselves.

Why you may be feeling stressed or anxious

Whether or not your organisation has had a COVID-19 positive case, you have had to be ready for one, and have implemented safety precautions. You have also had to manage increased anxiety among staff, residents, and family members.

Early research suggests high levels of symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia and psychological distress among frontline workers, indicating the need for workers and their organisations to make their mental health a priority.

So what can you do to look after yourself and others?

Looking After Your and/or Your Team's Psychological Wellbeing

This tip sheet is designed to help you recognise when you, or the people you supervise, might need additional help. It offers some evidence-informed strategies to maintain and optimise mental wellbeing.

Looking After Yourself

In addition to the tips below, please refer to the NARI tip sheet called Tips for Aged Care Workers for information on looking after mental wellbeing

Looking After Others: Tips for People in Leadership/Management Roles

- Make a mental health check part of handover – allow opportunities for staff to debrief about their shift, especially if it has involved non-routine work.
- Pay special attention to high risk groups, such as:
 - Less experienced workers
 - Those who have undertaken additional roles and/or worked well outside their normal role responsibilities and training
 - Staff who have worked excessive overtime due to staffing shortages
 - People who have been unwell with COVID-19/had to self-isolate, or had close family members with COVID-19
- Express thanks and appreciation to your team. Often positive reinforcement and acknowledgement can make a difference to staff morale.
- Provide opportunities for staff to ask questions and for clarification about their COVID-19 strategy in an open and democratic way. There should be space to express concerns if staff think infection control is compromised or they are unable to do their work to a good standard, and these concerns should be taken seriously and acted on if possible.
- Normalise open discussion amongst staff about the psychological effects of caring during a highly infectious pandemic.
- Inform staff that taking leave to cope with the pandemic is allowable and understandable.
- If a staff member is taking leave – check if this is due to mental health issues, fear of coming to work, and/or fear of catching COVID-19. Highlight that this is fine to do so, but that support is available.
- Look out for signs that people feel a large burden of responsibility/ expressions of guilt or rumination about what they should have done or not done differently.
- Remind staff that the virus is highly contagious and there is no fault or blame to those contracting it and/or inadvertently infecting others
- If possible, implement mental health initiatives such as an ongoing monitoring or checking in policy for staff members, peer-to-peer support, and providing training sessions and psycho-education. These could focus on factors contributing to anxiety, compassion fatigue, stress, and burnout, and teach strategies to enhance resilience and wellbeing in aged care staff, colleagues, and families.
- Provide opportunities for developing a meaningful and constructive narrative around their care work during a pandemic – this could be a structured forum in which staff can discuss emotional and social as well as the practical aspects of work.
- Find ways to encourage some 'fun' and humour (even if 'dark' humour to enable reducing internalized stresses)

- Be an ambassador for workplace reform. Create space and time for enhancing resilience, and for reflective practice
- Develop recommendations and resources like posters highlighting the importance of mental wellbeing as a communication tool and as reminders throughout facilities. The concept of [psychological PPE](#) might be helpful.
- Ensure you continue to provide support when returning to the new normal when the pandemic starts to recede

Resources

We strongly recommend that you also refer to the official sources listed below for up-to-date, reliable information.

Organisation	Audience	Description	More Information
<p>Australian Psychological Society (APS)</p> <p><i>Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information for Australians</i></p>	<p>General Public</p> <p>Carers</p> <p>Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>The APS has developed a series of information sheets that cover a wide variety of topics related to coping with COVID-19, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing lockdown fatigue • Maintaining your mental health during isolation • COVID-19 and frontline workers • Information for older adults • Tips for residential aged care communities 	<p>www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/COVID-19-Australians</p>
<p>Beyond Blue</p>	<p>General Public</p> <p>Carers</p> <p>Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>An Australian mental health and wellbeing organisation that offers online information, as well as a support service including telephone, online chat, and email support for those experiencing depression or anxiety, or going through a difficult time.</p>	<p>www.beyondblue.org.au</p> <p>1300 22 4636 (24 hours)</p>
<p>Department of Health</p> <p><i>COVID-19 Health Alert</i></p>	<p>General Public</p> <p>Carers</p> <p>Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>Up-to-date information about how the Australian Government is monitoring and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, how you can help stop the spread of the virus in Australia and what to do if you have symptoms. This website also reports the latest case numbers, official medical advice and information on treatment.</p>	<p>https://bit.ly/3bXFSb6</p>

<p>Lifeline</p>	<p>General Public Carers Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>A national charity providing all Australians experiencing emotional distress with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. Support services include phone, text, and online chat support.</p>	<p>https://www.lifeline.org.au/ 13 11 14 (24 hours)</p>
<p>Mental Health Australia</p>	<p>General Public Carers Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>A directory of helplines, websites and government mental health information services, providing information about mental health and how to seek help.</p>	<p>https://mhaustralia.org/need-help</p>
<p>Nursing and Midwifery Health Program Victoria</p>	<p>Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>An independent support service for nurses, midwives and students of nursing and midwifery experiencing health issues related to their mental health or substance use concerns. Provides screening, assessment, referrals, individual support sessions and groups for those seeking help to manage these health concerns.</p>	<p>www.nmhp.org.au/ (03) 9415 7551</p>
<p>Swinburne National Telehealth Counselling and Support Service</p>	<p>General Public Carers Healthcare Professionals</p>	<p>A free service has been developed to support residents, families and staff through the COVID-19 period. Trained counsellors (postgraduate health care students and provisionally registered psychologists) are available to stay in touch by phone or video calls to provide emotional support.</p>	<p>(03) 9214 8653 wellbeingclinic_agedcare@swin.edu.au</p>