



Healthcare Worker Mental Health Challenges Post-COVID

Overview

The mental health of healthcare workers was seriously stressed during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Benfante, 2020; Carmassi, 2020; Huang, 2020; Pappa, 2020). Unfortunately, the levels of burnout, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress continue to affect these workers (Shalev, 2017). The mental health of this workforce was already problematic prior to the outbreak (Weinberg, 2000) and then the intensive workload, vulnerability, ethical challenges, high number of patient deaths in any given shift, loss of control, deaths of co-workers, isolation, decision load, changes to procedures, and risk to family members and one's own health amplified the mental trauma (Aram, 2022; Dong, 2020; Gambaro, 2023; Le, 2021). Even years after the pandemic was declared over, health care workers continued to show signs of emotional and psychological distress (Hill, 2022; Maunder, 2023). It is important to understand the underlying factors contributing to the mental health challenges and focus on implementing strategies and changes to help healthcare workers cope with the challenges.

Mental Health

Burnout

Burnout is a symptom of emotional exhaustion. This may be attributed to the depleted healthcare workforce which has not allowed for full recovery from the accumulated impact of the extreme chronic stressors of work during the three-year arc of the pandemic (Baumann, 2023; Looi, 2024; Luceño-Moreno, 2020, 2022; Tan, 2023). Depersonalization and a diminished sense of pride and accomplishment lead to burnout by causing healthcare workers to distance themselves or withdraw from their work and patients. This begins a cycle of increasing moral distress and further depersonalization (Epstein, 2009; Maunder, 2023; Parandeh, 2022).

Anxiety, Depression and Stress

Psychological distress can exhibit as anxiety, depression, and/or stress. Studies indicate that psychological distress not only has not decreased since the end of the pandemic, but, for nurses, has increased (Hassannia, 2021; Kang, 2020; Li, 2021; Muñoz-Ortega, 2024; Newnham, 2022).

Current Environment



- Healthcare workers, particularly those based in hospital settings, have not recovered from the pandemic-related effects on their mental health and emotional well-being (Maunder, 2024).
- More than double the number of health care workers reported harassment at work in 2022 than in 2018 (Nigam, 2023).
- Forty-six percent of health workers reported often feeling burned out in 2022, up from 32% in 2018 (Nigam, 2023).
- Forty-four percent of health workers intended to look for a new job in 2022, up from 33% in 2018 (Nigam, 2023).
- One in 18 nurses report having suicidal ideation in the past year (Kelsey, 2021).
- Nearly 40 % of critical care nurses studied had symptoms of depression (Melnyk, 2021).
- Sixty-five percent of nurses report burnout (CrossCountry, 2025).

Argument for Implementing Increased Access to Mental Health Care

“Ongoing monitoring and support of the wellness of hospital-based healthcare workers is critical not only for individual well-being but also for the recruitment and retention of staff that is necessary for the well-being of the health care system” (Maunder, 2024).

Recommendations

Regulating Shifts

Both the shift workers and the employers need to assure a healthy rotation of schedules to ensure rest, sleep, and relaxation (Muller, 2020). The current environment of twelve-hour shifts may encourage workers to feel that they can hold two full-time positions working six twelve-hour shifts a week. This is neither safe nor healthy. Studies have found that 12-hour shifts can impair driving, negatively impact patient care, increase nurse errors, and impair the physical and mental health of the nurse (Melnyk, 2025).

Reducing Work-Related Stressors

Healthcare is intrinsically a stressful environment; however, coping skills vary among healthcare workers. Studies found that individuals who focused on and implemented active problem-solving strategies suffered less stress reactions than those who used more emotional-focused coping (Gan, 2004; Main, 2011). Emotional or “negative” coping is associated with increased psychological distress (Wang, 2020). Active or “positive” coping is associated with higher levels of well-being (Budimir, 2021; Hezaveh, 2021).



Healthcare workers should be encouraged to include positive coping strategies and wellness behaviors into their daily work to reduce anxiety and depression (Naushad, 2019; Serrano-Ripoll, 2020). These strategies may include yoga, social connections, and exercise (Schulte, 2020; Smallwood, 2021).

Healthy Work Environment

A supportive work environment includes shared governance, trust, and workplace safety. Supervisors should be empowered and encouraged to promote stress reduction strategies, mental well-being, productivity, and encouragement. Time needs to be allowed to complete tasks and to rejuvenate the workers. The workplace must be free for verbal harassment and physical abuse (Nigam, 2023).

A healthy work environment includes having a non-punitive culture, including for the reporting of substance abuse (Cheney, 2025). It is important for staff to feel safe identifying issues, potential problems, and errors for the highest level of care to be provided. In a safe, supportive environment, healthcare workers can re-establish a sense of pride and accountability in what they do, breaking the cycle of depersonalization and moral distress (Hatfield, 2025; Muller, 2020).

Digital support such as mobile mental health apps and telepsychiatry allow healthcare workers to access vital mental health services that can flex around work schedules and can be accessed in an unobtrusive manner (Muñoz-Ortega, 2024). Employers should be encouraged to include and normalize these support platforms in their Employee Assistance Program packages.

Resources

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