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Taking Care of Patients During the Coronavirus Outbreak: A Guide for Psychiatrists

The potential for the rapid spread of infectious diseases is a growing threat. In the early stages of an infectious disease outbreak such as the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), there is frequent uncertainty about the nature of the disease, its spread, scope, and impact. This often leads to emotional distress, even among those who have not been directly exposed to the disease.

Common psychological and behavioral responses include distress reactions (insomnia, anxiety, decreased perception of safety, anger, scapegoating, and increased presentation to healthcare due to fears of illness), health risk behaviors (increased use of alcohol and tobacco, altered work/life balance, social isolation, increased family conflict, and violence). Children and adolescents may also become distressed, which can manifest in "misbehaviors", social isolation, or diminished academic performance. A minority of individuals will develop disorders, such as depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress, that require formal treatment.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, most patients with preexisting mental health conditions will manage adequately and some may improve their functioning in the face of the challenges and needs of others. However, psychiatrists are likely to encounter some patients who have increased emotional distress resulting from the outbreak's impact on them, their families, and their communities. In working with their patients, psychiatrists should: 1) acknowledge concerns and uncertainty about emerging diseases, 2) share medical knowledge that is accurate and timely, and 3) identify steps the patient can take to reduce distress and sustain normal health behaviors, particularly sleep.

Psychiatrists can also play important roles in supporting healthcare providers, as well as consulting to community leaders on interventions that encourage healthy population behaviors and support the needs of critical community elements including police, firefighters, schools, and families.

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The following can help health care professionals support patients during COVID-19 and other infectious disease outbreaks:

Stay informed. Obtain the latest information about the outbreak from credible public health resources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in order to provide accurate information to your patients.

Correct misinformation. Misinformation can spread quickly and easily, causing unnecessary alarm. If patients present you with inaccurate information related to the outbreak, correct their misconceptions and direct them to vetted public health resources.

Limit media exposure. Encourage patients to limit media exposure. Today's 24-hour news cycle can make it difficult to turn away media, but research has shown that excessive media exposure to coverage of stressful events increases negative mental health outcomes. Recommend patients (and providers) use trusted media sources to gather needed information, then turn them off.

Educate. Psychiatrists are in an important position to influence patient behaviors for protecting individual, family, and public health by educating patients, collaborating with primary and emergency care providers, and providing consultation to healthcare and community leadership. Useful information includes common psychological and behavioral responses to infectious outbreaks, interventions to manage distress and risky health behaviors, and the importance of skilled risk communication in managing population mental health (See resources below for additional information on these topics).

Inform about stress reactions. Distress is common in the context of the fear and uncertainty caused by outbreaks. Help non-mental health medical colleagues anticipate and respond by:

a. Acknowledging and normalizing distress reactions ("I see that you're distressed, and that's understandable. Many people are feeling this way right now.")

b. Teaching patients to recognize their own distress reactions and health risk behaviors, and encouraging them to self-monitor and/or check-in with family members or friends. Managing these responses early can help so that they do not become impairing.

c. Discussing strategies to reduce distress, including:
   i. Staying prepared (e.g., developing a personal/family preparedness plan for the outbreak).
   ii. Taking everyday preventive measures (e.g., frequent handwashing, cough etiquette).
   iii. Maintaining restful sleep, eating regular meals, and exercising.
   iv. Limiting use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.
   v. Talking to loved ones about worries and concerns.
   vi. Practicing calming strategies including diaphragmatic breathing and muscle relaxation.
   vii. Engaging in enjoyable hobbies and activities.

d. Refer to specialized mental health care or emergency evaluation when a patient experiences severe emotional distress, develops a recurrence or worsening of mental illness, regularly uses substances to manage negative emotions, or has thoughts of harming themselves or others.

Identify and support high-risk patients. Patients with delusions, obsessive-compulsive thoughts and behaviors, a predominance of somatic symptoms, other active and uncontrolled symptoms, or those previously exposed to severe trauma may be particularly vulnerable. More frequent clinical contact can help address emerging concerns, which may help avoid severe exacerbations or hospitalizations. Ensure patients have adequate supplies of medications to avoid interruption in dosing during potential disruptions of pharmacy supply chains.

Take care of yourself and your loved ones. Psychiatrists are not invulnerable to experiencing emotional distress during outbreaks, and this distress can be compounded by caring for distressed or ill patients. Make sure to care for your needs: hydrating, eating, and sleeping; taking breaks; checking in with loved ones; practicing strategies to reduce distress; and monitoring yourself for stress reactions. Ensure that your office or organization has a plan to monitor the course of the outbreak and adjust your response to ensure adherence to the most current guidance.

Resources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 Info Page. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/index.html

Psychological Effects of Quarantine and Mitigation Strategies. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext

Taking Care of Your Family During Coronavirus https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019

Healthcare Provider Self-Care During Outbreaks. https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_Well_Being_Healthcare_Personnel_during.pdf

Educating Leaders about Helpful Communication Interventions During Outbreaks. https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Coronavirus_Leaders_Guide_to_Risk_Communication_in_the%20Face_of_Emerging_Threats_Outbreaks.pdf