

# For staff on the frontline - How are you?

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## How Are You?

Nurses are working at the frontline of this current crisis providing the acute and critical care that is needed to Covid-19 patients (and when present their relatives), attending to the mental health of service users deeply affected by the inherent anxiety and distress of the current situation, as well as attending to the immediate and diverse needs of the general public at a time of crisis. We will all also be managing our own anxieties about our health, our families and loved ones who may be at risk.

We know that our work as nurses can affect us; it is work that has relationships, human contact and emotions at its core. We may be working with people who will die, people who are facing terrible losses, with family members in distress and we are working in situations that are stressful, full of uncertainty, anxiety and immense pressure. We are required to bring our clinical expertise, strength, humanity and compassion to the fore throughout our working days.

**We can only do this work, and continue to do it, if we look after ourselves.** Whilst the physical work may be exhausting at times, the less visible emotional and psychological impact will also be significant and impact on how we think and feel. This is likely to be true for everyone in this current situation but will vary for individuals.

We want you to stop for a moment and consider. **How are you?** Not in that throwaway way in which this question can be asked by all of us but really **How are you?**

If we are in touch with how we are, we are better able to respond to this and look after ourselves and others.

Many people won't have the opportunity to attend supervision, reflective groups or staff support groups at this time, despite the need for them. We are hoping to share ideas, understanding and guidance to enable you to keep as well as possible, both during the current situation and importantly after the crisis is over.

So, **How are you?**



## Staying connected

It is really important to stay connected at this time. Pressures of workload, difficult feelings, fatigue and being very busy can cause us to become disconnected from others (patients, colleagues, family and friends) and from ourselves. Staying connected can enable us to reduce the feelings of isolation, of being ground down and can help us to keep in touch with the value and meaning of our work.

We know from experience and that **thinking about how we are enables us to think about how others are**, be they our colleagues, patients or family members. Similarly, **thinking about others can help us to think about how we are**. This is supported by the evidence of neurology, the neural pathways overlap, strengthening our capacity in either direction. So, the questions are - **How are you and How am I?**

**Being connected with ourselves:** When under pressure we can lose touch with how we are. This might be because we are too busy and distracted from noticing "the state we are in", or it might be because being in touch with how we are is difficult, upsetting and or distressing.

We know that our emotional state can influence our behaviour and relationships, if we can notice how we are, we are better able to look after ourselves and not act on these feelings. This might be a brief checking in with yourself at periods during the day; when you leave home, when you've had a handover, in the midst of your shift, before you leave. There are some practical suggestions later.

**Being connected with others:** Talking to others about how they are and how we are, is quite different to thinking alone. Talking with colleagues often reduces the sense of isolation, for example recognising that "we are not the only one who feels like that", puts us back in touch with our relationships and the support we draw from within them. Talking also allows feelings and experiences to be heard and thought about by someone else, often making them feel less exaggerated or overwhelming and more bearable in the process.



## How do we do this, under pressure?

There are some small steps you can take that can make a difference to your experience of being at work. They do take a small investment of time and a commitment to looking after yourself and your colleagues.

### Take 10

'Take 10' is a way of briefly checking in with yourself, it isn't in depth and the idea is to keep it simple. In the time it takes to count slowly to 10, just notice how you are; notice your physical state (heartbeat, muscle tension, physical sensations). Notice how you feel (relaxed, anxious, excited, angry etc.). Notice your thoughts (what is your mind busy with?). Having noticed the state that you are in, what do you need to do to look after yourself? Eat? Pause? Talk to someone? Have a break?

### Huddles

Huddles are a familiar concept in many settings, planning and taking time to pause and notice what is happening and what is needed. They can be helpfully used in relation to safety and patient care

How are individuals? How is the service functioning right now? What are the immediate priorities? What are the task/s that we need to do now? What psychological and physical resources do I/we need to do them?

They can also be helpfully used to keep people connected and communicating, enabling us to pause and notice the state the team is in and how individuals are.

What is happening and What is needed to look after the individuals in the team? What are the priorities in terms of looking after yourselves and each other?



They may be planned at certain times each day, they may be brief (5 or 10 minutes), they may be in person or at a distance, or they may be remote. The key idea is to pause, notice, think, talk with others and respond.

## Debriefs and Take aways

**Debriefs** provide a space and a structure to pause and acknowledge the impact of events or experiences. We can use them after an incident (such as a sudden or traumatic death), or after a shift that may have been particularly challenging or harrowing. It allows space for reflection, learning and feedback. They can be brief, or longer, self-managing or facilitated, immediate or as a follow-up, depending on the resources available. Debriefs allow the development of understanding of what has taken place, recognition of what went well, or may need to be learnt and space to acknowledge the immediate impact it may have had on individuals and services.

**Take aways** are another type of debrief. It can be helpful to have a brief period of time at the end of each shift, where people have a space to think and to say how their day has been, to give feedback to one another and to acknowledge what has gone well.

The idea is that people can stay connected with one another's experience, can express things rather than carry them home and can take time to acknowledge the achievements of the day and the things that they have appreciated or felt grateful for. It can be as small as two colleagues doing this remotely, or the whole team talking together.

If it is seen as part of the working day (rather than a 'luxury' or 'optional', or added on after work) it will enable people to attend. Aside from keeping people connected it can enable people to leave some things behind and to choose to take other things away with them, this is particularly helpful when there can be a cumulative effect over the day, the week or the month.



## Remote working

Many people are being required to self-isolate and to work from home. Being away from direct patient contact and away from colleagues at the frontline at this critical time may also cause people to experience feelings of guilt, isolation and anxiety. Working away from our colleagues and familiar settings takes adjustment. Keeping in touch with others is central not only in terms of being able to contribute but also keeping relationships alive, forming virtual and daily connections with others in similar positions can be supportive and enable some of the ideas above to be used.

## To end with...

We cannot look after others unless we adequately look after each other and ourselves, this is not self-interest, or a luxury but a necessity. Not looking after ourselves or our colleagues will have implications for people's current and longer-term wellbeing. This is more important than ever at present, we need to commit to looking after ourselves and our colleagues as best we can.

## How are you?