COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:

WAYS TO EMPOWER AND SUPPORT FRONTLINE STAFF

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Over the course of the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing frontline patient care to patients who are COVID+, under investigation (PUIs), or have COVID-like symptoms has been constantly evolving and very challenging for frontline medical staff. Given exposure risk and donning and doffing requirements, care coordination for these patients is extremely difficult. Nursing staff and nursing techs often provide the bulk of in-room patient care as well as many non-clinical tasks, which they carry out mostly on their own. They often have to manage patients' and families' anxieties, sadness, frustration and anger. As a result of these intense demands, frontline staff often experience physical exhaustion, as well as fear, anxiety, isolation, and burn out. Overall, healthcare providers perform best when they experience effective communication and when they are supported, protected, prepared, listened to, and cared for. The following are some tips for managers and medical teams to guide their efforts to improve the working environment for frontline staff.

Prioritize Good Communication

- How we communicate is just as important as what we communicate

- Strive for transparency and honesty with each other to maintain trust and sense of teamwork and appreciation

    o Spell out mistakes and what was learned

    o Provide reasons about changes, when possible

    o Give an honest response when possible; – an honest explanation, even if undesirable news, is preferred over no communication

- Make clear every day and on every shift, how truly valued staff members are and how much their contributions are appreciated

- Acknowledge that everyone is encountering new decisions and challenges, with limited and evolving information

    o Share your own experiences with this, instead of retreating because you feel overwhelmed and stressed

Listen to the Frontline Staff

- Develop effective mechanisms for gathering input and feedback from frontline staff
  - Consider anonymous suggestion boxes or emails, listening sessions, town hall meetings, and leaders visiting and spending time on hospital units

- Encourage frontline staff to speak up with questions or concerns

- Listen to and respond to staff's expert opinions and ideas about how to improve processes, procedures, and patient care

- Acknowledge and take seriously their thoughts, feelings, and concerns

- Ensure that the perspectives of frontline staff are incorporated consistently into all decision-making efforts and make the process transparent when possible

- Make changes in response to the concerns they raise to the extent that is possible

- Provide rationale for not resolving issues of concern in a nondefensive manner, while displaying sensitivity to the staff's thoughts and feelings

Strive to Offer Adequate Protection – Goals are to reduce the risk of infection for healthcare workers and their likelihood of becoming vectors for further transmission

- Prioritize providing adequate PPE and when not possible to do so, provide an explanation

- Do not discount or minimize frontline staff's perceived needs for PPE

- Offer rapid access to occupational health with efficient evaluation and testing for frontline staff

- Provide information and resources to guide healthcare workers in their decision-making about how to minimize the risk of viral transmission to loved ones

- Accommodate healthcare workers' safety needs based upon their level of risk (e.g., medical comorbidities, sociodemographic factors) to the maximum extent possible

- Make decisions and plans that balance and maximize safety, efficiency, consistency, and quality

Prepare the Frontline Staff

- Offer rapid and ongoing training to ensure adequate knowledge and skills for managing COVID-19 patients and PUIs

- Ensure round-the-clock access to experts

- Encourage bundling of orders, procedures, or other necessary hands-on patient care

- Encourage teamwork and a culture of help-seeking and the provision of assistance to one another

Support and Care for the Frontline Staff

- Ensure appropriate break time and time without PPE

- Prioritize the provision of healthy nutrition (meals, snacks) and time to partake in these

- Have available places to exercise, take walks, sit outside and support people's needs to do so

- Encourage people to take time off as needed

- Promote frontline staff's consistent practice of self-care and wellness (e.g., listening to mindfulness apps, exercising, going to a calm room for a time out)

- Ensure the availability of support for tangible needs (e.g., food, lodging if need to be apart from family, childcare, paid time off if quarantine is indicated)

- Advocate for additional assistance when needed so there is adequate staffing and ancillary support for frontline staff

- Encourage sharing what each team member is grateful for or made them smile at the end of each shift in huddle

- Check in with staff regularly about their emotional well-being

- Offer consistent and easy access to emotional and spiritual support for staff