

In Support of Caregivers: The Truth about COVID-19 and PTSD

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused heightened levels of stress among healthcare workers—and now there is growing concern about the long-term psychological effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Before COVID, about 22% of nurses experienced PTSD symptoms, compared with about 8% of the general population. For those serving in hospital COVID units today, some studies say the number is 60% or more.¹

Without recognition and treatment of the stresses caused by COVID-19, hospitals will suffer negative consequences: more staff sick-calls, higher turnover, disengagement, diminished quality of care, lower patient satisfaction, and decreased patient safety.²

Awareness is key

A simple first step is awareness, and that means knowing your enemy. Be sure everyone on your team can name and identify PTSD symptoms, including:

- Intrusive thoughts
- Re-experiencing a traumatic event
- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Sleep disturbances³
- Negative changes in thoughts and feelings
- Hyperarousal
- Fatigue
- Frequent illnesses
- Headaches

References:

1. Li X, Zhou Y, Xu X. Factors associated with the psychological well-being among front-line nurses exposed to COVID-19 in China: A predictive study. (2020) *J Nurs Manag*. 2020 Sep 5. Retrieved from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32890453/>
2. Leng M, Wei L, Shi X, Cao G, Wei Y, Xu H, Zhang X, Zhang W, Xing S, Wei H. Mental distress and influencing factors in nurses caring for patients with COVID-19. (2020) *Nursing in Critical Care* 10.1111/nicc.12528

Healthy stress management

Even better than identifying PTSD, is preventing it altogether. Nurse leaders can do this by openly discussing the topic, rejecting its stigma as a personal fault or weakness, and establishing an end to the pervasive “I’m fine” mentality in nursing.⁴ This new culture would focus on healthy stress management and open dialogue. Promoting wellness through a culture and mindset shift means leading with:

- Regular and honest communication
- Praise and positive feedback
- A commitment to mindfulness
- A method of accountability, including a buddy system and frequent/regular check-ins

As a seasoned nurse, I have witnessed the traumatizing effects of stress over my 30-year career. It’s clear COVID-19 has magnified the stress more than any other healthcare crisis in recent history. For me, it’s more than a professional crisis: it’s also personal. As a mom of twin ICU nurses, addressing PTSD has become a mission for me as I’ve watched these strong, dedicated nurses struggle. I’ve counseled, reassured, and supported them through a sea of emotions, and I’ve encouraged them to take the time for self-care and recognize the effects of stress. As a nurse I know what this ongoing battle requires, and as a mom, I look forward to calmer days ahead.

The team at Sizewise is dedicated to making the job of caregiver easier. Email clinicalsupport@sizewise.com if our team of nurses can help in any way.

3. Wang S, Xie L, Xu Y, Yu S, Yao B, Xiang D. Sleep disturbances among medical workers during the outbreak of COVID-2019. (2020). 10.1093/occmed/kqaa074 *Occup Med (Lond)*. Retrieved from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32372077/>
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