



In this podcast I want to talk about the mental health and well-being of health professionals, and in particular, nurses. This is even more important in view of the potential impact of the pandemic. The experiences of those on the front line of care will be challenged as never before. While health care is always an intense experience of caring for the people in all stages of life, usually people can go to work and can focus on that and not worry about their safety in the workplace.

In the pandemic there is the added burden of the risk of harm to oneself, and your own family and loved ones, as well as the discomfort of wearing protective equipment. This equipment reduces the usual capacity of health professionals to provide compassionate care in the way they might want to, and it reduces the ability of carers to communicate. Full face protective equipment reduces facial expressions and reduces the ability of staff to make a human and individual connection with people. It is difficult to identify individuals and their roles in a sea of masks, gowns and gloves. The restrictions on access to loved ones for family members places added burden on staff emotionally and physically.

Demonstrating compassion to those cared for is a protective mechanism against burnout. This makes the experience of providing care difficult and stressful. Added to this is the distress of not allowing families to have face to face contact with loved ones due to restrictions associated with managing the virus and stopping its spread. This is especially difficult at end of life when communication is often happening via electronic devices.

We are fortunate to have avoided thus far, the experience of overseas health care professionals who are dealing with great numbers of deaths, overcrowding of hospitals and lack of resources. The lack of resources means making critical decisions about who has access to life saving measures in the wake of the COVID19 virus. Knowing that people could have potentially been saved if the resources were available, adds an extra burden to the well-being of those making the decisions and witnessing the outcomes. This moral stress-where ethical decisions are at cross purposes with an individuals' values, continued over time, is implicated in burnout and compassion fatigue. When people are overloaded emotionally and cognitively it is a harder to learn and take on new skills- which is exactly what the pandemic is asking of health professionals.

Events occur within a social and historical context. Nurses historically were “in charge” and had connections with the military, starting with Florence Nightingale and the Crimean War in 1854. Thus, the emphasis was on doing your duty, taking orders, living in a strictly hierarchical structure, and coping with anything the war threw at you **without regard for a nurses' own welfare**. As well, Florence borrowed from a religious template to make nursing respectable, which allowed women to be employed outside the home. They borrowed the



idea of a uniform and veil. Women were housed in protective dormitories near hospitals, and were not allowed to marry and were called 'sister'. This is the professional inheritance.

The health professional usually finds deep meaning and life purpose through their work and is often motivated by altruism. The early days of nursing were enmeshed with sexism. Caring was "woman's work." And in later years this was a disincentive for men to become nurses.

Training often did not prepare people for the emotional labour of nursing. Usually junior nurses were expected to deal with whatever they were asked to do without question. A stiff upper lip and no expression of emotion was encouraged. Nurses may never have seen a dead or disfigured person, but would be expected to carry out tasks without complaint or any opportunity to discuss the aftermath of such exposure,- usually because the next task was pressing and urgent, or because it was important to be seen to be able to cope. Emotional labour is the concept of the idea of costs and benefits where caring is a major part of influencing clients and is linked to performance. This, coupled with the value placed by others on this work is an under- appreciated part of work as a health professional.

Historically nurses could not marry and continue working. Health care was seen as different from business and industry. It was accorded honor and privilege as something sacred, due to originally being carried out by those in religious orders. Now health care has entered the business arena, and in an era of scrutiny and accountability, is at odds with the former foundations and values of the profession. This is another pressure point on working in health care, which may conflict with the need to provide the best or most appropriate care. These gaps between the delivered care and the preferred level of care can place health professionals at risk of stress and burnout.

In the current circumstances there may be little opportunity to set limits on the demands being made on people. It is even more important then, to support colleagues and ensure they are able to continue with the level of demand made on them. Managing multiple deaths or critically ill people, long hours, increased anxiety for self and loved ones, no time for processing emotionally, or to attend to personal needs for exercise or connection, is a perfect storm for poor mental health outcomes.

Additional conditions that can increase the risk of compassion fatigue and burnout include: **Professional risks:** such as high workloads, low levels of support, lack of flexibility, lack of recognition, and high emotional demands. There may be a values conflict between the organization and the individual or excessive professional engagement.



**Personal risks are:** Not having or creating enough time for personal life. Lifestyle choices made in terms of substance abuse, diet, sleep and health. Poor work life balance. Low levels of support from family and friends. Sometimes it's difficult to discuss what happens at work, either because of privacy issues, or the material can be traumatizing or hard to listen to for non-medically experienced people. Perfectionism and competitiveness, coping strategies and poor or inadequate problem-solving capacity may all contribute to overall distress.

Self-care is very difficult to do for a variety of reasons: There are always competing interests for limited time. We all have multiples roles and there is role pressure around parenting, partnering, and professional expectations and needs. Culturally there can be expectations around the expression of emotions and the importance of feelings in a positive or negative way. People may have an investment in appearing strong and able to cope with anything without support or assistance.

There may be a lack of skill or knowledge which can include:

- Insufficient training or support for the allocated tasks, such as correct procedures for using protective equipment and this is especially true of managing end of life conversations and exposure to multiple deaths
- This may include a lack of boundaries that leads to being over involved, taking responsibility for others happiness, and over identification with others.
- Lack of support or permission to carry out self- care.
- Lack of awareness around how close to burnout someone is.
- Inability to prioritise the self and inability to organise or be assertive about their own needs.
- An exaggerated need to rescue or be important through helping, which leads to overinvolvement or overtime and a lack of boundaries between personal and professional. This can mean an unwillingness to share clients or delegate responsibilities.

It takes a degree of honesty and courage, as well as insight, for people to be able to identify how they are being impacted upon by their work. Being able to identify issues is one thing and being supported in the workplace is another. A work culture of compassion for staff, adequate supervision and monitoring of workloads is helpful, with a focus on the well- being of health professionals as well as client services.

Risks arising from a difficult or even toxic workplace culture or leadership are hard to overcome without political and group action. Depending on the impact and cost to the individual, and especially if it causes moral stress or affects health and well-being, may even



make it necessary to consider seeking alternative employment. The effect on mental health is a very real reason why self-care is important. Recovery from significant impact may be lengthy, and the person may not return to prior levels of functioning. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a possibility.

The individual's capacity for self-reflection can vary as well as their ability to take responsibility for their own well-being. We expect people to talk to us about their problems, their feelings, and about the most difficult experiences they will ever have. How good are we as health professionals at disclosing discomfort, anxiety, and asking for support? How do we model those behaviours? How does the teamwork allow for the time and capacity to engage with the issue of staff well-being?

When you sense danger whether it's real or imagined, the body's defences kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or-flight" reaction, or the *stress response*. This can happen even when the changes are positive. Common **external** causes of stress include: Major life changes, work, relationship difficulties, financial problems, being too busy, children and family demands. Common **internal** causes of stress: inability to accept uncertainty, pessimism, negative self-talk, unrealistic expectations, perfectionism and lack of assertiveness.

The long-term activation of the stress-response system puts people at increased risk of numerous health problems including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Heart disease
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Memory and concentration impairment.

Managing stress and work life balance requires time and commitment. Self-medication can mask anger, sadness, and frustration. It may feel better but using food or alcohol can have long term effects which may not be helpful. Much stress is generated by poor communication. This includes: **How** something is said. **What** is said. **Who** said it.

Be politely assertive. I feel (describe the emotion or impact), when (describe the behaviour or issue) and I need/would prefer it if (state your desired outcome). An example might be: I feel frustrated when you leave the things lying around on the floor that I could trip on and I need you to pick them up. Rather than blaming language such as "you always.." starting



sentences with “I” allows people to listen to your message as you are owning the statements and feelings as yours. People are less able to argue that you don’t think and feel what you think and feel, and focus on what is said rather than defending themselves when accused.

Set boundaries. Learn to say no. State your preferences. People do not know what you are thinking nor will they anticipate your needs, so be direct in stating what you need and prefer. Give feedback. Tell people what is going on for you. Keep an eye on colleagues and give feedback. I noticed ..... insert your feedback? Are you ok?

Practice immediacy. This means to deal with things as they crop up with a little reflection but don’t leave it too long or you may lose sleep or harbour resentment which will affect your functioning and relationships. Avoidance is not a good long- term strategy both because of the impact and the danger of blowing up instead of a controlled well thought out conversation. Seek clarification. Keep checking if you are unclear about an interaction or response. Listen without being defensive or wanting to be right. Seek to understand the other persons thinking and values about a situation.

We need to know our challenges, boundaries, joys and sorrows, and issues so they won’t take us unawares or be put onto other people and cause harm to ourselves and others. The more in touch with their own thoughts and feelings the more they will be able to separate theirs from someone else’s. The more comfortable that people are with emotion the more able they will be to allow others to express it. The more people acknowledge their own experiences the more they will be able to accept and understand other’s differences and similarities.

If individuals have a fragile ego that is not grounded in a healthy self- esteem they will operate to constantly defend and protect themselves. This can show up as hypersensitivity to criticism, or unconsciously looking for negative feedback to confirm what they really believe about themselves, and blaming and defensiveness when challenged. A healthy ego will process negative feedback with a look at the evidence, take responsibility for that which is true and refuse to take on board anything that is not. Self -acceptance and appreciation for all of your qualities and unique abilities, with the capacity to forgive yourself when you are not the best version of yourself, is important. Self –love is not a wussy thing. It means caring for yourself, providing for yourself and your needs, and setting limits and boundaries, expressing your preferences, and maintaining balance in giving and receiving.



Be aware of the impact of caring for others. Watch out for compassion fatigue and stress reactions. **Compassion fatigue** is a term that refers to a gradual lessening of compassion over time. Symptoms include:

- hopelessness
- a decrease in experiences of pleasure
- constant stress and anxiety
- pervasive negative attitude.

This can have detrimental effects, both professionally and personally including:

- a decrease in productivity
- the inability to focus
- feelings of incompetency and self-doubt
- lack of tolerance and irritability.

**Cognitive Symptoms** include:

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying
- Negative self-talk

**Emotional symptoms**

- Moodiness
- Irritability or short temper
- Agitation, inability to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Depression or general unhappiness

**Physical Symptoms** include:

- Aches and pains
- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Loss of libido
- Frequent colds and illnesses



### **Behavioural symptoms** include:

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Identify stressors and triggers. Avoid or change contact with them. Identify current ways of dealing with them and determine if they are healthy or unhealthy? Create new healthy ways of dealing with stress, diet, lifestyle, or relaxation. Sometimes changing perspectives, attitudes or expectations is beneficial. However, in the long term it's a cost benefit ratio. If your health and well-being is at risk, then if possible you may even need to change your lifestyle, your job or relationships. Sometimes it's not possible to make changes and all living entails some sorts of stressors. You may feel like the stress in your life is out of your control, but you can always control the way you respond. Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. Stress management involves changing the stressful situation when you can - changing your reaction when you can't. Sometimes it is difficult to determine the source of the stress-is it personal or professional or both? Talking helps. Seek help earlier rather than later.

Sometimes you might benefit from talking things through with a person who is objective and neutral. There are employee assistance services that provide free counselling. There is the 24 hour midwife and nurses hot line where someone is always willing to listen to how things are for you. <https://www.nmsupport.org.au/> Tel:1800667877. Your GP also can arrange a number of free or subsidised sessions with a counsellor.

### **Strengthen your relationships**

A strong support network is your greatest protection against stress. Spend time with the people you love and don't let your responsibilities keep you from having a social life. Make sure your relationships are helpful and nurturing.

### **Learn how to relax:**

You can't completely eliminate stress from your life but you can manage its impact.



Relaxation skills and stress awareness can make a real difference. When you know how to be calm you will maintain that state and return to it when necessary. Mindfulness and meditation are helpful tools.

### **Invest in your emotional health**

Most people ignore their emotional health until there's a problem. But just as it requires time and energy to build or maintain your physical health, so it is with your emotional well-being. People with good emotional health have an ability to bounce back from stress and adversity. This ability is called **resilience**.

### **Identify triggers**

What are your early warning signs? Sensitivity to noise, irritability and having a "short fuse", eating more eating less, disturbed sleep, lack of tolerance, negative thinking. Self-medication with cake, chocolate, wine and drugs. Taking risks and behaving erratically. Take regular inventory of how you are managing.

**Recreation. Restoration.** What are those things that make you peaceful, relaxed, and happy? How often do you do them? Are you having enough fun? What stops you from doing more of them?

Are the expectations of yourself and others-realistic and achievable?

What are your preferred ways to bring back balance and to energise yourself. Everyone is an individual and people have preferred ways to reenergise. For the introvert it is often found in solitary activities and quiet time. For the extrovert it may mean extra connection with friends and social contact. Every person must decide for themselves what is their best version of life.

Finally.

- If it feels wrong don't do it.
- Say exactly what you mean with kindness if you can.
- Don't be a people pleaser to your detriment.
- Trust your instincts.
- Never speak badly about yourself.
- Don't be afraid to say no.
- Don't be afraid to say yes.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Let go of what you can't control.
- Stay away from drama and negativity.
- Treat your body with respect.





Start to make a self-care plan and make your wellbeing a priority. Continue to monitor yourself for early warning signs of burnout and fatigue. Check in with your loved ones about how they see you managing. Continue to make sure you are living your best life. Peace of mind, health and well-being are created by continually making sure that all aspects of life support and maintain your joy in living purposefully and happily. Please stay safe and take care. Please check on colleagues and how they are managing under these extraordinary circumstances. Your courage, commitment and care for the welfare of others is inspirational. Please feel free to contact me should you wish to have an education session on MND for your agency or to receive a secondary consultation. You can contact me on: 0428264446 or email me at: [Robyn.reid@smrpcc.org.au](mailto:Robyn.reid@smrpcc.org.au)

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