



Department of Health

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Dear Colleagues:

It is hard to believe that we are already in our fifth month of pandemic response after New York's first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed on March 1. We—both individual New Yorkers and healthcare providers—have been through a lot, with many unknowns still ahead. This month, I want to discuss the importance of addressing and managing mental health, both for the patients seeking your help and for yourselves as healthcare providers.

Supporting New Yorkers under Stress. When the spike in COVID-19 cases began in March and we entered New York on PAUSE, the Department of Health immediately prioritized mental health, making free remote counseling available to all New Yorkers. Through the amazing generosity of professional volunteers, the COVID-19 Emotional Support Hotline is available for residents at **1-844-863-9314**.

The physical isolation, social distancing, and stay-at-home policies of New York on PAUSE drastically reduced community engagement, which studies have [shown to be a stabilizing and healing force](#) in people's lives. While some found social support through phone calls and virtual connections, many continue to grapple with increased loneliness, difficulties working remotely, concerns about loss of employments and professional identify, emerging financial crises, and domestic violence exacerbated by physical confinement.

Preliminary data from an ongoing [Census Bureau survey](#) suggests that at the end of May, one-third of Americans were showing signs of clinical anxiety or depression because of the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked questions normally used to screen patients for mental health problems, 24 percent showed symptoms of major depressive disorder and 30 percent showed symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder.

When people are struggling to cope emotionally with everyday challenges, they sometimes fear that these feelings indicate mental illness, and that a "normal" person would be able to easily handle the pressures. As care providers, we can direct them to counseling and mental health services. But we should also remind them that their feelings are natural human reactions to stressful and potentially life-threatening situations. Because of the many unknowns about COVID-19, feeling confused and frightened are normal, understandable reactions to extremely unusual events. Rushing to pathologize emotional responses can be harmful. We must be mindful of communicating context to help our patients better understand their reactions.

As individuals and as a society, one larger cause of anxiety we all share is being unable to predict when the COVID-19 pandemic will end. We all need practical solutions for daily life. To help with this, the State is partnering with Headspace, a global leader in mindfulness and meditation, to offer free [meditation and mindfulness content](#) for all New Yorkers. These science-backed, evidence-based guided meditations—including at-home mindful workouts, sleep, and kids' content—can help soothe rising stress and anxiety.

Supporting Frontline Healthcare Providers under Stress. Many health providers continue to inhabit high-stress environments as they participate in the COVID-19 pandemic response efforts, often pushing themselves to the brink and beyond. We saw this during the spring over the weeks of the virus's surge in New York hotspots. The amazing providers who gave their all to save lives on the frontlines—doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, social workers, assistants, aides, technicians, therapists, and others —often ignored their own needs.

In normal times, individual healthcare workers may be experienced in and feel competent dealing with challenging situations. But with COVID-19, our frontline providers had to confront extremely difficult situations repeatedly, resulting in physical and psychological stress. It was shattering for many of us in New York to hear of the suicide in April of a prominent emergency medicine physician who worked on the frontlines at a northern Manhattan hospital that saw many COVID-19 patients from the Bronx. As a [recent commentary](#) in the *New England Journal of Medicine* noted, “The COVID-19 crisis comes as a blow to a population already at heightened risk for psychological distress and mental health problems.”

To help providers cope with the added stress, fatigue, and emotional injury associated with the pandemic, the Department incorporated a provider mental health component to our now-biweekly [provider webinars on COVID-19](#). The July 9 session was [devoted entirely to provider wellbeing](#).

One of important point is that we need to make interventions at the personal, work unit, organization, and societal levels if we are to adequately help individuals. Resilience is not always the right answer. When someone is in distress, being told that they should be “coping better” only adds to their burden, making them less inclined to reach out when they need help.

A recent [NEJM article](#) commented on the broad scale of collaboration needed to resolve this issue: “Clinician well-being is a complex systems issue with multiple responsible parties, including employers, professional associations, insurers, quality-improvement organizations, and state and federal government.” For the here and now, it is critical that we connect providers with the information and resources to help them remain energized, engaged, and supported in their work and their personal lives.

One last thing: As we recognize National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month in July, Governor Cuomo has proposed new regulations requiring insurers to provide equitable coverage for mental health and substance use disorders. The proposed parity compliance program regulations from the State Department of Financial Services and the Department of Health would strengthen insurers' obligation under both state and federal law to provide comparable coverage for benefits to treat mental health and substance use disorders. This is part of New York's greater effort to address institutional racism and provide equitable care to all New Yorkers.

Throughout our response to this pandemic, the excellence, strength, and unwavering commitment of New York State's clinician workforce have been a source of strength and comfort. Thank you again for your continued phenomenal work.

Sincerely,



Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.