



# How to meet the unique needs of the healthcare worker

**Amid the emotional** and physical toll of this crisis, an unexpected response to the COVID-19 Pandemic is the mass appreciation of your frontline healthcare workers sweeping across America. While on the news we see stories of communities, individuals and companies rallying for healthcare workers as they enter hospitals, the need for public thanks is outweighed by the need for individual support. Pre COVID-19, frontline healthcare workers in general had some of the highest rates of burnout, depression, anxiety and suicide among any profession<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the emotional fitness of your frontline workers should be a priority during and post pandemic.

**Multiple studies** have demonstrated that licensed healthcare providers have rates of depression nearly three times the National average. Moreover, 40% of Physicians are reporting burn-out and up to 74% of physicians report some symptoms of burn-out, as compared to 25% of the general workforce<sup>2,3,4</sup>. The exceptional levels of daily stress, exposure to trauma, and excessively long hours are some of the major contributors. Additionally, women disproportionately make up the healthcare workforce and have additional and unique stressors. For providers, fear of losing their license and a continued general stigma among healthcare providers inhibits many from seeking the help that they need.

**As the COVID-19 Pandemic** enters into its peak, many of your already distressed healthcare providers are experiencing unique stressors, compassion fatigue and trauma unseen before in the general population. Globally, frontline healthcare workers

are being exposed, contracting and dying from COVID-19 at a rate several multiples of that in the general population. Your frontline healthcare workers are likely experiencing heightened levels of fear, anxiety, and even powerlessness. As their “fight or flight” systems are activated, you may even see some act in anger and rage particularly against those they perceive to be putting them in harm’s way. A recent JAMA article identifies 7 stressors contributing to mental health issues among healthcare providers during the COVID-19 Pandemic<sup>4</sup>, including:

1. **Emotional strain and physical exhaustion** when caring for growing numbers of acutely ill patients of all ages who have the potential to deteriorate rapidly
2. **Caring for coworkers** who may become critically ill and sometimes die from COVID-19
3. **Shortages of personal protective equipment** that intensify fears of coronavirus exposure at work leading to serious illness
4. **Concerns about infecting family members** with coronavirus from workplace exposures, especially family members who are older, immunocompromised, or chronically ill
5. **Shortages of ventilators** and other crucial medical equipment in COVID-19 hot spots that are rapidly becoming overwhelmed by critically ill patients
6. Anxiety about **assuming new or unfamiliar clinical roles** and expanded workloads in caring for patients with COVID-19
7. **Limited access to mental health services** for managing depression, anxiety, and psychological distress

# Steps to sustain your co-workers' emotional fitness

**There are many steps** you can take to mitigate the harm of these stressors and sustain your co-workers' emotional fitness during the pandemic. The JAMA

article<sup>4</sup> succinctly describes what frontline healthcare workers are requesting and what you can provide. The table below is an adaptation from that article.

## Sustaining your co-workers' emotional fitness

Request	Response
"Hear Me"	Create an array of input and feedback channels (listening groups, email suggestion box, town halls, leaders visiting hospital units) and make certain that the voice of healthcare professionals is part of the decision-making process.
"Protect Me"	Provide adequate PPE, access to occupational health with efficient evaluation and testing, information and resources to avoid taking the infection home to family members, and accommodation to health care professionals at high risk.
"Prepare Me"	Provide rapid training to support a basic, critical knowledge base and appropriate backup and access to experts. Clear communication must acknowledge that everyone is experiencing challenges and decisions, everyone needs to rely on each other in this time, individuals should ask for help, no one needs to make difficult decisions alone, and we are all in this together.
"Support Me"	Provide support for emotional and psychologic needs for all, including psychologic first aid deployed via webinars and delivered directly to each unit (topics may include dealing with anxiety and insomnia, practicing self-care, supporting each other, and support for moral distress). And, in instances of acute distress, provide individual support.
"Care for Me"	Provide support for physical needs, including access to healthy meals and hydration while working, lodging support for individuals living apart from their families, transportation assistance for sleep deprived workers, support for childcare needs, and paid time off if quarantine is necessary..

**Post-COVID-19**, the ability to rejuvenate your providers will be critical to maintaining your workforce. You can start planning and take several steps to promote emotional fitness. These include:

### Understanding trauma and its likely sequel

- Prioritizing the mental health needs of your frontline staff
- Making treatment, both pharmacological and therapy, readily available which may include:
  - Tele-Psychiatry and Tele-Therapy
  - On-Site support groups
  - Providing discounted rates and improved access

**During this time** of crisis, it is critical that you provide workplace solutions to mitigate harm and sustain your frontline healthcare workers and, post-COVID-19, provide them resources to rejuvenate and allow them to flourish with respect to emotional fitness.

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6367114/pdf/cureus-0010-00000003681.pdf> (Burn out Highest)  
 2. IsHak WW, Lederer S, Mandili C, et al.: Burnout during residency training: a literature review J Grad Med Educ. 2009, 1:236-242. 10.4300/JGME-D-09-00054.1  
 3. <https://www.medscape.com/slideshow/2019-lifestyle-burnout-depression-6011056>  
 4. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/rural-monitor/healthcare-professionals-mental-health/>  
 5. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2764380>

# What is Emotional Fitness?


**The first step** in supporting your employees in their emotional wellbeing is to fully understand what that means. Many people believe if they aren't feeling ill, they don't have to attend to their health. But people who are physically fit (i.e. they exercise, eat well and get enough sleep) know that just because you are not ill, it does not mean you are healthy. Although not everyone has a chronic illness such as diabetes or high blood pressure, everyone catches a cold sometimes and one of the best defenses against illness is fitness. Emotional health and wellbeing is no different.

**Emotional Fitness** is the capacity to build emotional strength, endurance, and flexibility through meeting essential needs, securing a sense of belonging, cultivating a sense of purpose, and finding opportunities to flourish. It is not characterized by the absence of a mental health

disorder, in fact, a person can be dealing with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder or ADHD and still have the capacity to be emotionally fit. It is about being resilient, positive and focused. Just like physical fitness, emotional fitness is one of the best defenses against emotional fatigue, illness and injury. Supporting your employees' emotional fitness will help them to build emotional strength, endurance and flexibility, allowing them to persevere during these ever-changing and uncertain times.

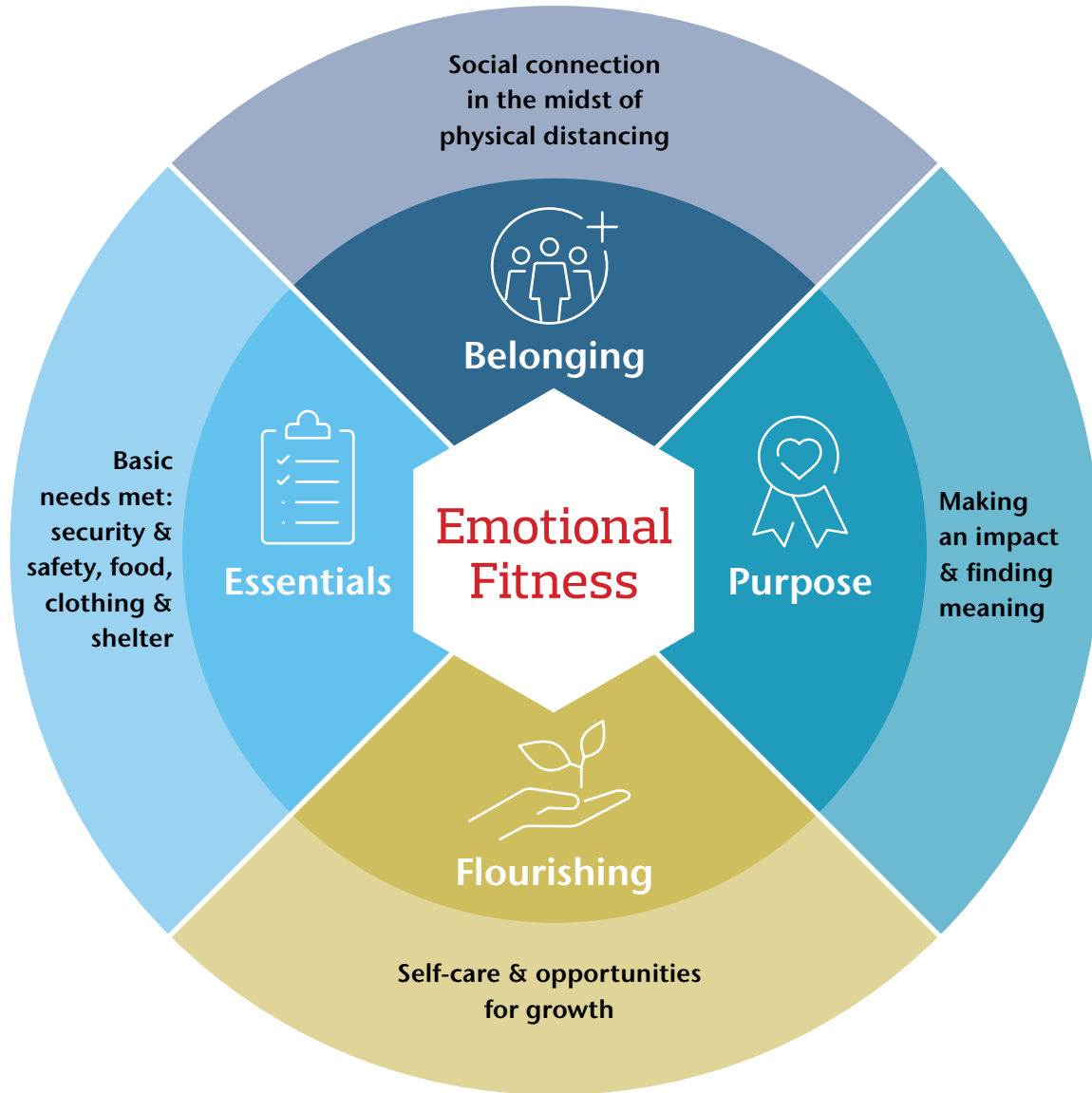
**At this time**, and into the foreseeable future, employers have a significant role to play in helping their employees thrive in whatever their new working environment may be, however temporary. The purpose of this document is to outline suggestions we believe employers should consider as they adjust to support their employees' emotional fitness.

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# Recognizing the general emotional fitness needs of your employees

Emotional Fitness is the capacity to build emotional strength, endurance, and flexibility through meeting essential needs, securing a sense of belonging, cultivating a sense of purpose, and finding opportunities to flourish.



Sources: Emotional Fitness at the Workplace, ACSM, IAWHP, Volume 21 / Number 5, September 2017; Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.

# Meeting essential needs



**Before you can** help your employees to thrive, they must first feel their basic needs are being met. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the two most basic needs are

physiological (food, water, warmth and rest) and safety/security. In the midst of job insecurity and financial distress, it may be hard to experience anything other than fear and anxiety.

**In addition to** the anxieties of fulfilling our basic needs, changes with job conditions could mean increased pressure to balance the demands of work while simultaneously being a caretaker for children or loved ones. Or perhaps, it's the unexpected new responsibility of becoming a caretaker for family or friends in need.

**Of course**, within all of this, we are all experiencing loss like no other. Whether it's the loss of a routine, a job, or a loved one, we are all experiencing grief.



## Care for Caregivers

Provide access to back-up care, tutoring, maternal health, and eldercare vendors.

Proactively communicate with your team about the need for flexibility (and model it for them), allowing employees to set the boundaries they require.

Reach out to employee resources groups (ERGs) or champion networks as "boots on the ground" to identify employees' emergent needs.



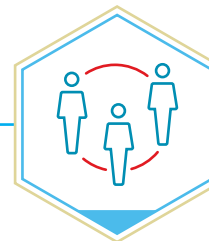
## Ensure Safety and Security

Establish a listing of local resources/assistance for employees to meet their basic needs i.e., food, shelter and safety.

Communicate physical and psychological safety protocols often, based upon industry and roles.

Increase options to support financial security by:

- Leveraging the temporary flexibility authorized under the CARES Act by adopting the increased 401(k) loan limit, highlighting the ability for those affected by COVID-19 to take early 401(k) withdrawals without penalty, and taking advantage of tax-preferred student loan reimbursement.
- Considering life planning accounts in strategy design.
- Modifying PTO accrual, use, carryover and cash out policies



## Provide Support

Identify and aggregate all internal resources to support employee emotional health and make the contact information easy to find.

Create a strategy with your health plan, EAP or behavioral health partners to prepare for what's going to come.

Increased risk of anxiety and depression.

Mental health crisis, grief, bereavement, violence, workplace safety events.

Communicate coverage of COVID-19 related costs through all benefit offerings (health plan, pharmacy, COBRA, disability, life insurance, 401k loans).

# Securing a sense of belonging



**A 2019 survey** found that 3 in 5 Americans reported feeling lonely<sup>1</sup>. With current shelter-in-place orders and recommendations for physical distancing, those numbers

will likely only increase. Another study found that lack of strong relationships increased the risk of premature death from all causes by 50% – an effect on mortality risk roughly comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and greater than obesity and physical inactivity<sup>2</sup>.

**Humans are hardwired** to connect, and isolation can have a huge impact on us emotionally. Connecting with others is one of the most powerful healers. In a time when everyone is encouraged to physically distance from one another, it has never been more important to encourage social connection. We are all in this together. Your leadership has an unprecedented opportunity to set the tone and create a culture of belonging to combat social isolation.



## Driving Connections

Increase opportunities for social connection and camaraderie in spite of ‘physical distancing’, i.e. video meetings, virtual coffee or happy hours even for those currently not working.

Encourage employees to choose a work-buddy with whom they connect daily.

Provide manager training to identify employees who live alone and may need additional support.



## Share the Good

Kick off team meetings by checking in on an emotional level. Inquire if anyone has a positive story or “silver linings” to share.

Leverage company social media sites to post sentiments of gratitude or share inspirational quotes and encourage employees to join the group/page.

Recognize collective business impact successes; i.e., the capacity to have xx employees working virtually simultaneously, xx packages delivered.



## Demonstrate Empathy and Compassion

Feature your CEO sharing regular updates and his or her own stories of adjusting and connecting to reassure, normalize, and humanize feelings and emotions.

Encourage leaders to be available and engage in authentic conversations with teams and individuals, inquiring how they are and what they need. Share current personal experiences.

1. 2019 Cigna Loneliness at Work Survey

2. Social Relationships and Mortality; A meta-analysis - <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

# Cultivating a sense of purpose



**A sense of purpose** not only helps us to find and do things that add meaning to our lives, it also helps when things go wrong. Life has presented us with an unforeseen event that, outside of anything we can control, may be hindering our ability to achieve the things for which we were striving. A healthy sense of purpose helps us to put these events in perspective, to refocus on the things that are meaningful, and move ahead. Having a sense of purpose is not only good for our health, it is good for business. Purpose is correlated

with 32% fewer hospital visits, and 61% fewer overnights in the hospital<sup>1</sup>. Employees are more satisfied at work when their jobs feel meaningful. The resulting gains in worker productivity add up to over \$9,000 per worker, per year.<sup>2</sup>

**Although you aren't** responsible for helping your employees find their purpose in life, you can help them build purpose in the work they do and find meaning in the midst of chaos. Everyone has an opportunity to make a contribution to the world, and it's important to highlight how the work being done has a positive influence even during a global crisis.



## Giving Back

Facilitate employee charitable donations programs, especially those related to COVID-19.

Encourage acts of kindness and community support i.e. helping colleagues, volunteer from home opportunities, groceries for neighbors, food for front line workers.

Allow employees with surplus PTO to donate time to co-workers exceptionally impacted by COVID-19 and unable to work.



## Understanding Impact

Connect work tasks to the impact they are having on the world.

Share customer success stories so employees hear how their work is making an impact.

Provide company charitable donations based on employee participation in healthy habits or community giving; i.e., 10 day plank challenge, weekly walk/run mileage, mask-making, food shelf donation..



## Creating Meaning

Create your vision statement of how the organization is supporting or positively contributing during the current crisis.

Encourage employees to take time to talk one-on-one and reflect on ways they made a difference this week.

1. BetterUp. Meaning and Purpose at Work. 2019. Retrieved from <https://get.betterup.co/rs/600-WTC-654/images/betterup-meaning-purpose-at-work.pdf>

2. Kim ES, VJ Strecher, CD Ryff. Purpose in Life and Use of Preventive Health Care Services. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. Nov. 18, 2014; 111(46): 16331-16336. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4246300/>



# Finding opportunities to flourish

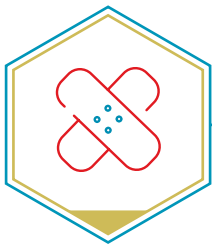


**It is possible** to thrive and flourish during times of crisis, but it may look different than we typically expect. We can adjust how we define flourishing in the face of a

pandemic. As employers, it's important to acknowledge that each individual employee is processing external events and their own situation at their own speed. While some may be adaptive and flexible, others may be truly struggling to find their new normal. There are opportunities, however, to help your employees grow, develop, and become their best selves.

**Inner strength**, fortitude and grit are built in times of stress and discomfort<sup>1</sup>. It is, in fact, in those moments that exists the most opportunity to build resilience, learn and grow both as an individual and organizationally. Our capacity to cope with and recover from hardship has a big impact on our overall happiness and ability to thrive in life.

**During this time** of crisis, employers have the opportunity to leverage what is learned to move forward in ways never thought possible. "Necessity," it is said, "is the mother of invention."



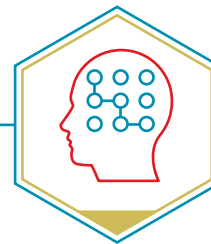
## Practice Self-care

Promote the importance of self-care through high-traffic communication channels and include the importance of staying active, eating for energy, getting quality sleep, keeping a regular schedule including breaks, and prioritizing personal hygiene.<sup>2</sup>



## Strengthen Resilience

Share inspirational stories of employees who have overcome challenges related to COVID-19. Aggregate free trial options from vendors for mindfulness and resilience and make accessible to employees.



## Learn and Grow

Encourage employees to embrace extra time they may have gained from shelter in place for bonding with family, connecting with old friends, starting a book club, or daily walks. Initiate professional growth opportunities like mentorships, industry certifications, job sharing from home, connecting with others in the organization. Allow time for innovation and reinvention during a time of need - it may create business opportunities.

1. <https://www.mindful.org>

2. Extracted from below reference <http://workplacementalhealth.org/covid19tips>

# A word on grief

**Grief is the process** of reacting to a loss. It is a normal response to an abnormal situation. In this time of pandemic, we all are experiencing loss in one way or another. For some it may be loss of loved ones, for others it is missing time spent with family and friends, the cancellation of hallmark events such as graduations or weddings, or even the inability to do the things we love on a daily basis. Experiencing grief will look different to all of us, but it's commonly expressed through symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, change in eating and sleeping patterns and agitation or sadness. There are six main stages of grief shown below. People may bounce from stage to stage during this time and it is important to allow for flexibility, adequate transition time and resources to allow your employees to grieve.

## How Employers Can Help

- Recognize and acknowledge that employees are grieving, and talk about it openly with them
- Leverage the resources and communications of your EAP to support members experiencing grief
- Promote or add virtual counseling option through health plan, EAP and/or behavioral health provider
- Be empathetic and compassionate – proactively reach out to managers so they can support employees through various stages and types of grief



On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss, 2007, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, David Kessler.  
Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief, November 5, 2019, David Kessler

# Contacts

## Aon contact list

### National Health Care Industry Practice

- Peter A. Brawer, Ph.D.  
Senior Vice President - Population Health  
[peter.brawer@aon.com](mailto:peter.brawer@aon.com)
- Frank Lonardo  
Senior Vice President - National Health Care  
Industry Practice Leader  
[frank.lonardo@aon.com](mailto:frank.lonardo@aon.com)

### National Specialty Practice

- Janie Douglas  
National Specialty Practice Leader  
[janie.douglas@aon.com](mailto:janie.douglas@aon.com)
- Stephanie Pronk  
National Health Transformation Practice Leader  
[stephanie.pronk@aon.com](mailto:stephanie.pronk@aon.com)

### Health Transformation Team

- Bridget Neurer  
[bridget.neurer@aon.com](mailto:bridget.neurer@aon.com)
- Suzy Clausen  
[suzy.clausen@aon.com](mailto:suzy.clausen@aon.com)
- Sue Desai  
[sujuta.desai@aon.com](mailto:sujuta.desai@aon.com)
- Lisa Burt  
[lisa.burt@aon.com](mailto:lisa.burt@aon.com)
- Rod Hart  
[rod.hart@aon.com](mailto:rod.hart@aon.com)
- Denise Heybrock  
[denise.heybrock@aon.com](mailto:denise.heybrock@aon.com)

## Resources

### Call Centers and Hotlines

If you are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety or depression, reach out for support.

- Crisis Text Line  
**Text “Home” to 741741**
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
**1.800.273.8255**
- SAMHSA’s Disaster Distress Helpline  
**1.800.985.5990**

### Links to Additional Reliable Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
**[COVID-19: Managing Stress and Anxiety](#)**
- American Psychiatric Association (APA)  
– **[COVID-19/Coronavirus Resources and Information Hub](#)**  
– **[Coronavirus and Mental Health: Taking Care of Ourselves During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)**
- World Health Organization (WHO)  
**[COVID-19/Coronavirus: Mental Health Considerations](#)**
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)  
**[Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine and Isolation](#)**
- National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI)  
**[COVID-19 and Mental Illness Guide](#)**

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