




Inner strength

Health care workers' mental health guide
Aetna Resources For LivingSM



**Doctors, nurses,
paramedics and more —
you're dedicated to
helping others. But
what happens when
the helpers need help?**

A male doctor in blue scrubs and a female nurse in a white lab coat are looking at a clipboard together in a clinical setting. The doctor is holding the clipboard and pointing at it, while the nurse looks on attentively. They are both smiling slightly, suggesting a positive interaction. The background is a bright, out-of-focus hospital hallway.

You're on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. And this poses a risk to both your mental and physical health.

Right now you might be in survival mode. But there are small things you can do to care for yourself. And if you notice symptoms of depression, anxiety or distress, it's important to seek help.



Health care workers are especially tough. But that doesn't mean they're immune from mental health issues.



You can take simple steps to improve mental health for yourself and others. Learn the facts about mental health. We've compiled a list of helpful articles and resources here.



Resilience comes with small actions. Use any free time you possibly can to rest, talk to loved ones and care for your health.

Contents

- Self-care for health care workers 5
- Make a difference 6
- Depression 7-8
- Understanding suicide 9-10
- Anxiety 11-12
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) 13
- Mental health and well-being resources 14



Self-care for health care workers



You're no stranger to stress. But COVID-19 and concerns about resources has taken stress to a whole new level. And while "self-care" may sound like a luxury, it's critical that you find ways to recharge. Here are some ideas to consider:

During your shift⁷

- **Work closely with your team.** Teamwork is more important than ever before. Offer support to others and ask for it yourself. Consider pairing newer staff with those who are more seasoned. And check in regularly with others.
- **Pace yourself.** Things may be moving at a breakneck pace, but it's important to monitor your wellbeing and take breaks when you can.
- **Focus on what's within your control.** You may not be able to change your access to ventilators, masks and protective gear right now. Try to focus your energy on solving problems that are within your control.
- **Avoid taking on too much.** People need you right now. But they don't need you in a burned out state. It may be tempting to work around the clock and skip breaks, but this pace puts you and others at risk for burnout.

Between shifts

Breaks have never been more important. Try to make the most of your free time by:

- **Talking to loved ones.** You may be restricted to digital contact, but video and phone calls can help you feel connected.
- **Taking care of your body.** Stress is hard on your body and mind. Make time to sleep, eat healthy foods and engage in physical activity.
- **Managing your mind.** If possible, avoid reading or watching the news. Your work time is stressful enough. Read a book, watch a funny show and do things that help you mentally relax and recharge.

You're on the front lines of this crisis. And you take care of everyone around you. Make sure you take care of yourself too.

⁷[Managing healthcare workers' stress associated with the COVID-19 virus outbreak.](#) U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Accessed March 2020.





Make a difference

Misconceptions about mental health

You may think that you have to be strong for everyone right now. People are counting on you. But your mental health matters now more than ever.

These misconceptions can prevent you and your colleagues from getting the necessary support. Here's how:

- **People feel ashamed and embarrassed.** You wouldn't feel like you had to hide your heart disease or cancer. People who have a mental health condition often feel ashamed.
- **People deny there's a problem.** Some believe you should be able to cure yourself because "it's all in your head."
- **People don't seek help.** If you're keeping your illness a secret because you're embarrassed, it's harder to seek help.

Mental health stigma and its effects can be worse than the mental health problem itself. This can lead to isolation, loneliness, shame and secrecy.

People can get better

With the right help and support, people can get better! Every person is unique. And there are various treatment options out there. So each person should search for the option that works best for his or her needs. Treatment can include medication, therapy and wellness plans. The important thing is for you to reach out and seek help.

What you can do to help

You can make a difference. Consider these tips:

- Use respectful language when talking about mental health
- Learn more about mental health issues
- Speak out against mental health stigma and speak up for mental health awareness

People with mental illness can feel alone. If you think someone is dealing with a mental health problem, listen without judgment. Be present. Encourage the person to seek help from their doctor or a mental health professional. And convey hope. If you want to learn more, check out these resources:

- **The Campaign to Change Direction.** You can take the pledge at [changedirection.org](https://www.changedirection.org)
- **Mental Health First Aid.** Sign up for a general mental health first aid course or one specially developed for first responders at [mentalhealthfirstaid.org](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org)



Depression



Depression is one of the most common mental health problems people face today. Each year major depression affects approximately 16 million Americans. And it's the leading cause of disability worldwide.²

It's not uncommon to experience feelings of sadness every so often. But when these feelings last for longer periods of time or are really severe, you may have clinical depression.

Depression can interfere with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat and enjoy activities you once enjoyed. It may even be hard to get out of bed in the morning. Fortunately, we're gaining a better understanding of depression which has led to highly effective treatments.

We now know depression involves biological, psychological and environmental factors.

Recent events in someone's life may play a role. Increased stress and poor coping skills may also contribute to depression.

² [Mental Health by the Numbers](#). National Alliance on Mental Illness. Accessed March 2018.





Symptoms of depression

The number and severity of depression symptoms can vary from one person to another. Some people experience only a few symptoms while others experience many. Common symptoms include:

- Persistent sad mood
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies or enjoyable activities
- Decreased energy, fatigue, feeling “slowed down”
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Problems sleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Restlessness or irritability
- Persistent physical complaints such as headaches or chronic pain

Causes of depression

In some families, major depression appears to show up in each generation. But there doesn't have to be a family history of depression for it to occur.

- People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism or who are easily overwhelmed by stress are also prone to depression.
- People with medical illnesses such as stroke, a heart attack, cancer or hormonal disorders often experience depressive symptoms. These symptoms may then make the medical condition worse or prolong recovery.
- A serious loss, difficult relationship, financial problem or any stressful (unwelcome or even desired) change in life patterns can also trigger a depressive episode.

Very often, a combination of factors is involved in the onset of a depressive disorder.





Understanding suicide

If you're like a lot of people, you may feel uncomfortable when the subject of suicide comes up. It's important to think about where those feelings come from. Maybe they come from fear, stigma or something else.

Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States, claiming more than 44,000 lives in a given year.³

This raises important questions:

- What can you do to stay healthy?
- What if someone you know threatens to hurt him or herself?
- What should you do if a coworker seems depressed?

The good news is, you don't have to be a therapist to help.

Know the signs

Many people who attempt suicide give warning signs. Take these signs seriously. You could save a life. Here are some common signs that someone may be thinking about suicide:

- Talking about wanting to die
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, like searching online or getting a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless
- Withdrawing from family or friends
- Giving away prized possessions
- Putting affairs in order — like updating a will
- Taking risks
- Saying goodbye like it's the last time

³ [Suicide](#). National Institute of Mental Health. Accessed February 2018.

Risk factors

Anyone can be at risk for suicidal thinking or behavior. But these factors can put a person at greater risk:

- Access to guns or pills
- Drug and alcohol use
- Prior suicide attempts
- Feeling alone
- Feeling angry
- Feeling like a burden
- Tolerance for violence or pain
- Chronic illness
- Money problems
- Family history of suicide





What can you do if someone seems suicidal?

If someone you know seems depressed or suicidal, it can be scary. Know that you don't have to fix the person's feelings or solve his or her problem. But there are things you can do.

Focus on listening and giving support. Here are some tips to consider:

- Ask the person if he or she is thinking about suicide — it will open up the conversation
- Take all threats seriously
- Call a suicide hotline to get advice
- Don't leave a suicidal person alone
- Call 911

If you know someone has a plan and the means for suicide, get help right away. Depending on the person's risk or location, you can always call 911.

Talking to a suicidal person

Don't underestimate the power of being present. It can give hope and help someone feel less alone. If you feel like you don't know what to say, ask questions and listen. Here are some other tips:

- **Ask questions.** It's important to ask if the person is thinking about death or suicide.
- **Encourage treatment.** Know it's not your job to take the place of a therapist.
- **Offer to help find support.** You can research treatment options, make calls or arrange for a ride to the hospital for an assessment.
- **Remove dangerous items.** If you can, try to remove things like knives, razors, guns or drugs from the person's possession. Don't put yourself in danger. If you're not nearby and you know the person has access to lethal means, call 911.
- **Take threats seriously.** Avoid making light of threats, talking about yourself, using guilt trips or daring the person to engage in suicide.

Suicide is scary. And for some, talking about suicide can be scary too. By asking the hard questions, listening and connecting people to resources, you can make a difference.



Anxiety



Facts about anxiety

This is a period of great anxiety. You may be in constant fear of exposure to COVID-19.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health condition in the United States. In fact, 40 million U.S. adults are affected by an anxiety disorder.⁴

Everyone worries. But how do you know your worrying is an issue? We've put together some facts about this important topic.

What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety isn't just a feeling. It often shows itself in the body. It can look like:

- Racing heart
- Shaking hands
- Dry mouth
- Sweaty palms
- Upset stomach

When a person feels anxious over a long period of time, he or she might have other symptoms. Of course it's important to check with a doctor to figure out the cause. But anxiety can lead to issues such as sleep or digestion problems, headaches or lowered immunity. And it can make other health issues flare up.

⁴ [Facts & Statistics](#). Anxiety and Depression Association of America. Accessed March 2018.

⁵ Sanders, Robert. [New evidence that chronic stress predisposes brain to mental illness](#). Berkeley News. Accessed March 2018.

⁶ [Causes of Anxiety and Depression: Symptoms and Signs](#). The Ranch. Accessed March 2018.

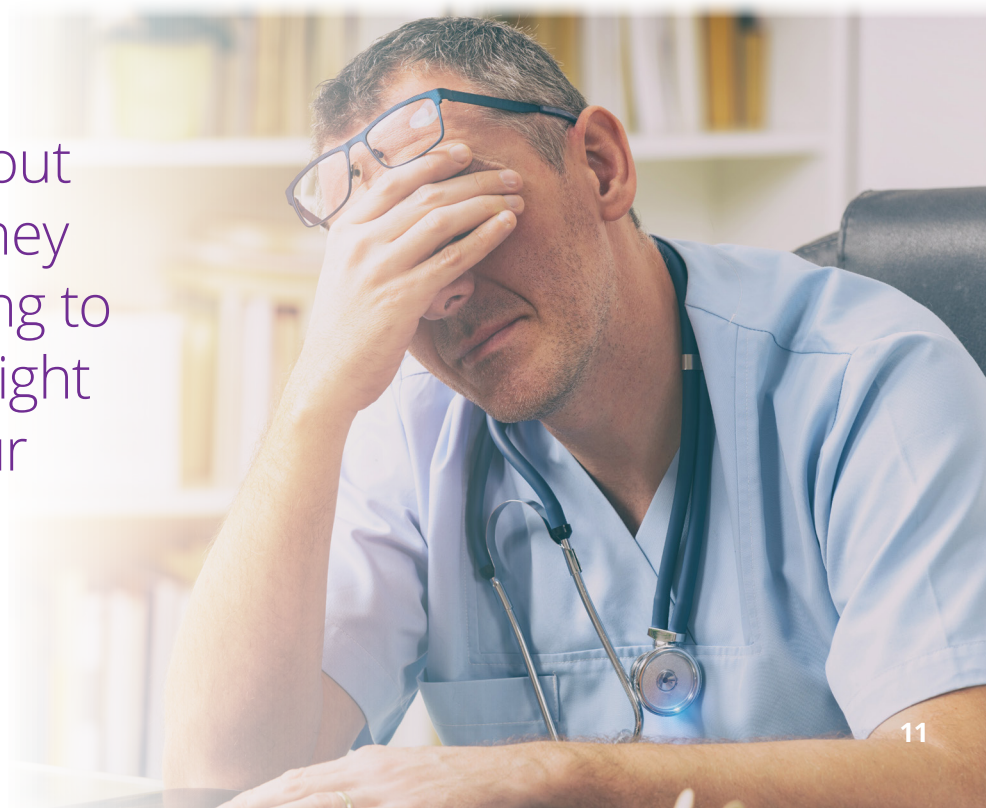
What causes anxiety?

Most people feel scared or anxious at some time in their lives. And it's normal to worry about things at times. Many people feel anxious when they're faced with a life problem, decision or change. But anxiety disorders are different. They can get in the way of people living the lives they want.

Feelings of fear are meant to help us. So when we feel fear or anxiety, it's our bodies trying to help us cope. It doesn't mean we're weak. Science shows most mental health issues are due to complex factors.

Anxiety disorders may result from biological factors that change the way the brain works. Studies have shown long-term stress can change nerve centers in the brain.⁵ Anxiety can also run in families. And sometimes a trauma or even a welcome event such as a wedding or promotion can trigger anxiety.⁶

People often read about disorders and think they have one. Keep reading to find questions that might help you decide if your anxiety is an issue.





What are the types of anxiety disorders?

People get anxious about different things. But when it comes to anxiety disorders, most of them fall into one of these categories:

- **Panic disorder.** People with this condition have feelings of terror that can strike out of the blue. Panic disorder can look and feel like a heart attack. It can include symptoms such as sweating, chest pain, choking and irregular heartbeat.
- **Social anxiety disorder.** This is sometimes called social phobia. It involves fear of being judged by others or acting in a way that might cause embarrassment. It can lead to a person being afraid of common social situations.
- **Specific phobias.** A phobia is an intense fear of a specific object or situation. Common phobias involve snakes, heights or flying. Some phobias may cause people to avoid everyday situations.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder.** This disorder involves extreme worry, even if there is little or nothing to provoke the anxiety. Friends and family might call a person with generalized anxiety disorder a “worry wart.”
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** A person may experience PTSD after seeing or living through a trauma. This disorder includes thoughts you can’t get rid of, flashbacks or nightmares. A person may avoid things and situations linked with the trauma.

How do I know if I need help managing my anxiety?

It’s normal to have some anxiety. But how do you know if you could use a little help? If your anxiety gets in the way of living the life you want, you may want to seek help. You don’t have to be a therapist to know if anxiety is causing you issues. Ask yourself if your worries:

- Keep you from going about your routine
- Prevent you from reaching your goals
- Leave you feeling overwhelmed

It’s a good idea for everyone to build skills to help manage stress and worry. If you notice your anxiety prevents you from living your life, there’s help out there. A counselor or therapist can help you develop skills to better manage your anxiety and stress.

How can I reduce my anxiety?

There are many treatments and self-help tools to help manage anxiety and fear. Treatment with a therapist with or without medication can make a big difference. Other healthy habits can help combat anxiety, such as exercise and meditation. Lots of people struggle with anxiety. Many never ask for help.

You’re not alone. Treatment is available and it can really help. Anxiety shouldn’t keep you from living your life.



Post-traumatic stress disorder



Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder some people experience after being exposed to a traumatic event. A traumatic event is one that's very scary and distressing. It might be an accident, assault, natural disaster, combat, crime or ongoing neglect.

And you don't have to go through the event yourself to experience PTSD. Sometimes seeing, learning about or talking to others who went through the event can lead to a traumatic response.

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

PTSD symptoms look a little different in each person. Symptoms tend to fall into the following categories:

- **Intrusive memories.** Nightmares, unwanted memories, flashbacks, severe distress in response to reminders of the event
- **Avoidance.** Trying not to think or talk about the event or avoiding people, places and things that are reminders of the event
- **Negative thoughts and feelings.** Emotional numbness, guilt and shame, feeling detached from others and having negative views of yourself, others or the world
- **Changes in physical and emotional reactions.** Emotional outbursts, being easily startled and having trouble sleeping

Who tends to get PTSD?

Most people will feel some sort of distress after a stressful or upsetting event. But not everyone will develop PTSD. In fact, within a group of people who experience the same crisis, only some might experience PTSD. Others won't.

Doctors aren't sure why this is so. But it may come down to individual differences. These may include a mix of factors like:

- Past trauma
- Family history of depression and anxiety
- Ability to manage stress
- Access to supports

Health care workers and PTSD

Right now you're on the front lines. You may encounter one crisis after another. And like combat veterans, this can put you at risk for developing PTSD.

But it may be hard for health care workers to seek help. Trained to respond to trauma, you might feel pressure to be "trauma-proof." Experiencing distress might make you worry you're not up to the job. You may think your feelings show weakness. And you might be afraid of others' judgment.

But trying to hide or ignore your distress can lead to bigger problems. It can make it harder to deal with those thoughts and feelings. Many mental health professionals are offering telehealth options right now. If you are suffering, you don't have to wait to seek help.

Treatment for PTSD

Some people with PTSD will try to ignore their symptoms or treat them with things like drugs and alcohol. And this can lead to a substance use disorder, relationship issues and other problems. But there's hope. Treatment can help PTSD.

There are different treatment options. Some involve talking or thinking about the traumatic event under the guidance of a professional. Others may address unhealthy beliefs about the event. And medication prescribed by a doctor may help too. Treatment can be very effective and help people get back to a place of wellbeing.

Trauma can be a normal, human reaction to an abnormal event. But with understanding and treatment, people can recover.





Mental health and wellbeing resources

Mental illness doesn't just affect the person with the disease. It also affects anyone who cares about or lives or works with that person. Chances are, mental health conditions have touched your life in some way. If you want to learn more about mental health issues and how you can help, consider these resources.

Mental Health First Aid

Do you want to learn more about mental health problems and how to respond? Similar to CPR and First Aid training, Mental Health First Aid helps people identify, understand and respond to mental health issues. You can find a local training at [mentalhealthfirstaid.org](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org).

General mental well-being

- [National Institute of Mental Health](#)
- [Mental Health America](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Mental Health](#)
- [Person-First Language](#)
- [MindCheck®](#)
- [The Campaign to Change Direction](#)

Mental health concerns

- [Anxiety Disorders Association of America](#)
- [Depression Bipolar Support Alliance](#)
- [Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America](#)
- [Postpartum Support International \(PSI\)](#)
- [National Alliance for the Mentally Ill](#)
- [Parenting Well — Resources for Parents with Mental Illness](#)

Addiction

- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#)
- [Narcotics Anonymous](#)
- [Gamblers Anonymous](#)
- [Al-Anon/Alateen](#)
- [SAMHSA National Mental Health Information Center — Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)

Suicide

- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Resources Center](#)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
- [Stop a Suicide](#)



Thank you for taking care of our communities during this time.

And know that while you're strong, you're not mentally invincible. We're here to help. You're not alone. Call us anytime.



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