

PROVISION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR HEALTH CARE WORKERS DURING LOCKDOWN PERIOD

1. Background and Introduction

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).¹ The most recent Coronavirus disease is referred to as COVID-19. On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was alerted to several cases of pneumonia in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. Subsequently, on 7 January 2020, Chinese authorities confirmed that they had identified a new virus in the coronavirus family of viruses, which includes the common cold and viruses such as SARS and MERS. WHO declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020.²

South Africa reported the first case of Coronavirus, on the 05th March 2020, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases confirmed that a suspected case of COVID-19 has tested positive.³ Studies has shown that at least 30 mental health professionals in a major psychiatric hospital in Wuhan, Hubei province, China were diagnosed with COVID-19. Possible reasons quoted were the lack of caution regarding the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020 and insufficient supplies of protective gear to health care workers in the hospital.⁴ The unprecedented circumstances surrounding the emergence of COVID-19 have created a great deal of stress and uncertainty for many patients, families, communities and healthcare providers⁵ across the globe including South Africa. The uncertainty of the general populations towards this diseases, is caused by the fear of the unknown regarding its management, since it is the first outbreak of its kind.

In order to address this uncertainty in the South African Public Service, the Employee Health and Wellness Programme addresses these challenges in the workplace. The Employee Health and Wellness (EHW) Strategic Framework for the Public Service caters for the provision of psychosocial support in the Public Service.

¹ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situationreports>.

² <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situationreports>.

³ <http://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/novel-coronavirus-infection/>

⁴ Xiang (2020, 1) The COVID-19 outbreak and psychiatric hospitals in China: managing challenges through mental health service reform.

⁵ Karmel Choi, PhD (kwchoi@mgh.harvard.edu) and Jordan W. Smoller, MD, ScD (jsmoller@mgh.harvard.edu).

2. Management of Psychosocial Stressors (Mental Health) during COVID-19 Outbreak

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it a range of issues regarding mental health.⁶ Officials dealing directly with the affected individuals are the one who bear the brunt as they have to assist while they are impacted themselves. For health workers, feeling stressed is an experience that many are likely going through; in fact, it is quite normal to be feeling this way in the current situation. Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection of weakness or poor performance. Managing stress and psychosocial wellbeing during this time is as important as managing personal physical health.⁷

Some of the Stress-related symptoms Health Care Workers may experience include but not limited to: (1) changes in concentration/thinking/memory; (2) Feeling tense/irritable/anxious; (3) Changes in energy/appetite/sleep; (4) Social withdrawal, (5) Reduced productivity, (6) Interpersonal conflict. Some individuals may be more susceptible to stress during an outbreak, including those with prior mental health conditions.⁸

Stress coping mechanism for Health Care Workers providing services at the forefront against COVID-19 as follows:

- Staying connected with family/friends/community in creative ways.
- Managing challenging emotions with acceptance, mindfulness, relaxation, soothing and/or pleasurable activities.
- Avoiding unhelpful coping strategies like substance use, rumination/constant worrying, high-risk behaviour.
- Engaging in positive lifestyle behaviours such as physical activity and eating healthy, using acceptance, re-framing, and problem-solving as needed.
- Practicing sleep hygiene.

As Health officials will be rendering services during the lockdown period, it is pivotal that their wellbeing is catered for in this difficult period.

⁶ Nowbath(2020.1)unpublished

⁷ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/>

⁸ Drs. Korte, Denckla, Ametaj, and Koenen of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health summarize tips for coping with COVID-19 stress.

Through the Wellness Management Policy for the Public Service, EHW Practitioners in the Department of Health will offer psychosocial/counselling services should they be required during the lockdown period.

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Below is the list of National and Provincial EHW Practitioners who can be contacted if services are required.

PROVINCE	NAME	CONTACT
1. National Health	Ms Thulani Ntshani	012 395 8603
2. Gauteng	Ms Palesa Koetsi	082 564 3781
3. Western Cape(outsourced to Metropolitan)	Ms Bernadette Arries Ms Kelly Fortune Ms Michelle Buise	083 556 6163 083 947 9395 071 895 6446
4. KwaZulu-Natal	Ms Narisha Gobind	072 570 5440
5. Free State	Mr Duncan Moeketsi	083 511 7767
6. Mpumalanga	Ms. Conny Ntshane	071 189 1486
7. Limpopo	Ms Ntabiseng Mokobedu	082 722 7765
8. North-West	Ms Connie Ratsiani	078 893 2133/ 081 391 4372
9. Eastern Cape	Ms Tinoshi Govender	083 378 0126
10. Northern Cape	Ms Myrtle de Freitas	073 689 7245

In cases where the EHW Practitioners are not available, the following EHW Provincial Coordinators from their respective Offices of the Premier can be contacted:

PROVINCE	NAME	CONTACT
1. Gauteng	Ms.Menyezwa Mandu Menze	083 299 6081
2. Western Cape	Ms. Fatima Gallie	082 626 1496
3. KwaZulu-Natal	Mr. Mzwandile Gumede	082 450 7708
4. Free State	Ms. Limakatso	063 688 6685
5. Mpumalanga	Mr. David Shongwe	082 958 6525
6. Limpopo	Ms. Tlakale Nkadimeng	084 583 1687
7. North-West	Ms. Chake Mokoka	082 924 2649
8. Eastern Cape	Ms. Milisa Ndoro	072 157 9838
9. Northern Cape	Mr. Bonny Thekisho Ms. Liezl Anthony	082 9601982 082 418 0822

