

Preparing for Practice

A Handbook for Final Year Students

Preparing for Practice as a health professional during COVID 19

A message from the Dean of Students

2020 will be remembered by the entire population because of COVID 19. For a cohort of healthcare students it will be even more so.

This year for new physician associates, paramedics, diagnostic and therapeutic radiographers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and healthcare practitioners and scientists, the first days and weeks in practice are going to be like nothing experienced in generations. Nothing comparable has happened to the NHS since World War 2 and nothing with such a global impact ever.

You are joining the workforce earlier and more rapidly than you expected. You will have been disappointed to miss out, the break you richly deserved over summer after graduation and of course the ceremony itself.

You are probably anxious about missing the last weeks of clinical practice and the focus revising would have given you. Please be assured that your training so far means that you will be a valuable asset in this crisis and there is no doubt you will learn quickly. You will be learning about the NHS response to a new disease giving us new challenges. No one is expecting anything other than that you do your best. This will be an experience you remember for your career and for your life.

One of the many challenges you will be facing is that of looking after yourself and each other, and to recognise how and when to look for support and help. I'm confident that you will meet this challenge and we will do our best to continue to support you as much as we can.

I'm very grateful to Queen's University Belfast for sharing this booklet with us at St George's and hope that you will find it helpful in the challenging times ahead. All of us at St George's are grateful to you for all your hard work and dedication and wish you luck.

Do look after yourselves..

Dr Aileen O'Brien



No previous situation is directly comparable to the one in which you find yourself of course. The global nature of this crisis, and the near certainty that it will continue for several months, make it very different.

Only your cohort will have this specific experience, and it will define your entire career. This is why it is so important for you to consider the psychological impact of the pandemic on the entire population, on the patients you will treat in the coming months, on your family and friends, and on you.

Professor Neil Kennedy, Director of Centre for Medical Education, Queen's University Belfast
Friday, 3rd April, 2020

“The nature of being a doctor is to go above and beyond to deliver the care our patients require. But in this crisis situation, compassion, civility, and self-care will matter more than ever.”²

Dame Clare Marx, chair of the GMC





Introduction

It is self-evident that psychological distress accompanies any emergency situation.¹ This guide focuses on the potential psychological effects of this crisis for the public, patients and ourselves. As clinicians, looking after each other and caring for ourselves are much more important than ever at this difficult time. If we are not well ourselves, how can we care for others?

In the words of Dame Clare Marx, Chair of the GMC²,

“None of us has experience of a pandemic like this. Dealing with coronavirus is the biggest challenge to face the NHS since it was founded. And it’s going to ask a lot of us all.”²

How true these words are for each and every one of us. At the best of times **uncertainty** can be a defining feature of our work, but never before has this been more prominent. Having control over our lives gives us a sense of security. By its very nature a pandemic strips away this sense of control and we feel uncertainty, anxiety and fear. To feel otherwise would not be human. As much as possible we need to anticipate this and try to **mitigate** feelings of **helplessness** and **loss of control**.

The moment of transition from student to health or social care professional is a defining time in one’s career and is accompanied by mixed emotions. It is a significant **challenge**, and will be even more so now. No one could possibly wish for the scenario that faces us at present but, historically speaking, rising to the challenge in seemingly impossible situations has been the hallmark of the medical profession. They are professions which pride themselves which prides itself on **giving** and **caring selflessly** for others and it is already evident that this is our approach at the present time. The attitude of 750,000 members of the public who have volunteered to help the NHS gives us further encouragement and moral support.³ The worst of times brings out the best in people. In the most difficult of circumstances we can and will rise to the challenges that face us as individuals. Adopting a positive mindset, taking control of situations, learning as quickly as possible and adapting to evolving situations will all be of paramount importance. Being **tolerant** and **forgiving** of our own failings and weaknesses will also be a key aspect of our coping strategy.



While we would never have wished you to embark on your career in such circumstances, your skills, resourcefulness and support to the existing medical staff will be invaluable at this critical time. Words cannot express adequately our and the public’s heartfelt thanks to you for the significance of the contribution you will undoubtedly make. What you, the youngest generation of practitioners learn during this pandemic will unquestionably inform responses in similar situations and shape future medical practice and the nature of the NHS and social care.



Effects of a Public Health Crisis

Psychological distress manifesting itself in sadness, anxiety, hopelessness and anger accompany any emergency and are experienced by most people.¹ “The prevalence of common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety is expected to more than double in a humanitarian crisis.”¹ They tend to improve over time for the majority but for some the effects will be long term.¹

Almost everyone is facing quarantine. “Quarantine is the separation and restriction of movement of people who have potentially been exposed to a contagious disease.”⁴ For the most part, this feels unnatural and unpleasant. A review in the *Lancet*⁴ identified a number of negative psychological effects associated with mandated mass quarantine including “post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion and anger.”⁴

Factors contributing to increased psychological distress include; a longer duration of quarantine, fears of infection either through infecting loved ones or fear that physical symptoms may be perceived as signs of the disease, confinement, isolation, inadequate supplies or inadequate information including a lack of clarity from public health authorities or the government. Financial loss may lead to longer term anger or anxiety with those on a lower income more likely to be adversely affected. Stigma, due to a perception of risk of infection, may be a relevant factor particularly for healthcare workers perpetuating the trauma and distress already experienced.^{4,10}

In order to mitigate some of the psychological effects of mass mandated quarantine, emphasising the altruism and sacrifice of others in order to keep vulnerable members of society safe is important. It is often easier to bear suffering if we feel our effort is benefiting someone else.⁴ Clear information about procedures, duration of isolation and how to access help if one becomes unwell, along with adequate supplies and financial assistance are crucial. Providing people with practical advice on coping with stress and uncertainty, including encouraging the use of technology to improve social networking and support groups are simple interventions we can all do which can be of benefit. Support of colleagues quarantined and managerial assistance are essential in order to reduce stigma and feelings of guilt among healthcare workers.⁴



Mental Health Problems

80% of respondents were identified as being at high/very high risk of burnout with junior doctors most at risk⁵

27% reported a diagnosis of a mental health condition
40% reported a “broader range of psychological and emotional conditions”⁵

1 in 3 responded that they used alcohol, drugs, self-medication or prescribing as a means of coping with a mental health condition⁵

Key findings from a pre-pandemic report by the BMA⁵

Practising medicine does not offer immunity to psychological distress or mental illness. A recent BMA survey⁵ of 4300 UK doctors and medical students revealed significant concerns regarding wellbeing within the profession. Key findings are included in the coloured circles. Questions were raised over pressures faced by doctors, resultant poor mental health and a culture where those in need felt unable to seek help.⁵ This can also apply to other health and social care professionals.

This survey was conducted over a year before the Coronavirus pandemic. Pre-existing concerns regarding our wellbeing, the pressures we face and our mental health, are likely to pale in comparison to the magnitude of the crisis we now face.

The challenges are likely to be numerous. Moral dilemmas relating to inadequate resources, fears about our lack of knowledge or experience which could place others at risk, an inability to balance the needs of our patients against our own physical and psychological health or those of our loved ones and the traumatic experiences we may face will sometimes dominate our thinking and perhaps our conscience.⁶

Mild and normally manageable psychological difficulties or traits are common and can be exacerbated in a pandemic such as this. Mild obsessional thoughts, for example, related to cleanliness could develop into significant fears regarding contamination and compulsive hand washing in excess of recommendations.⁷ Similarly, an awareness of or caring for patients or colleagues who may not recover may lead to significant personal anxiety related to our own health and mortality. While the risk to our individual personal health for most people is likely to be low,⁸ anxiety surrounding this is natural, understandable and common.

Ethical dilemmas encountered in both our personal and professional lives can lead to additional stress. Balancing our duty of care towards our patients along with anxieties about protecting our families and loved ones can cause a sense of helplessness due to a feeling of being unable to balance these seemingly competing factors. Simple steps such as adhering to the latest infection prevention guidance⁹ and appropriate use of personal protective equipment will not only help ensure we minimise the risk of infection and further transmission but also give us a sense of control which may mitigate anxiety.



Resilience and Psychological Growth

For some, this crisis may lead to psychological injury and predispose us to experience a worsening of pre-existing mental illness or lead to the development of a new condition.⁶ For others, as highlighted in a paper in the BMJ, “Managing mental health challenges faced by healthcare workers during COVID-19 pandemic”⁶ they may “experience a degree of post-traumatic growth, a term used to describe a bolstering of psychological resilience, esteem, outlook, and values after exposure to highly challenging situations. Whether someone develops a psychological injury or experiences psychological growth is likely to be influenced by the way that they are supported before, during, and after a challenging incident.”⁶

It is crucial that we acknowledge and understand the threat this crisis poses, not only to our physical health, but to the psychological health of our community, our patients and ourselves.¹⁰ If we understand and acknowledge the inherent psychological risk, we can try and take steps to protect our mental health, act quickly if we do become unwell and minimise the risk of long lasting damage to healthcare staff.

The GMC has some good advice which could apply to other health and social care professionals:

“If you know or suspect that you have a serious condition that you could pass on to patients, or if your judgement or performance could be affected by a condition or its treatment, you must consult a suitably qualified colleague. You must follow their advice about any changes to your practice they consider necessary. You must not rely on your own assessment of the risk to patients.”¹¹

Key points with regards to mental health and mental illness

- Prioritise your mental health as well as your physical health¹⁰
- Seek appropriate and timely help if you feel you may be suffering from a mental illness or psychological distress. Do not be afraid to seek help or look on it as a sign of weakness
- Communicate with your GP, supervisor and occupational health department as appropriate
- Take advice offered including making any necessary changes to your practice
- Be kind and try and support colleagues as much as possible
- Recognise that many doctors already suffer from mental illness⁵ and no one is invulnerable to the development of a mental illness or burnout - if this affects you, remember you are far from alone



Looking After Yourself

The following is not intended to negate or eliminate the distress we will all experience during this time. Emotions, both positive and negative, are a natural and normal response to the situations in which we find ourselves.

The following suggestions, with some additions, are taken from the WHO document, “Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations During Covid-19 Outbreak”¹⁰, in recognition of the stress generated by this crisis in the population. These suggestions may help support mental and psychosocial wellbeing for ourselves, our communities and our patients to minimise, albeit not eliminate, the distress experienced.

“Managing your mental health and psychosocial wellbeing during this time are as important as managing your physical health”¹⁰

Some people may find maintaining individual religious or spiritual beliefs provides comfort and benefit for them

“For health workers, feeling under pressure is a likely experience for you and many of your health worker colleagues. It is quite normal to be feeling this way in the current situation”¹⁰

“You should not be hesitant in keeping yourself psychologically well. This is not a sprint; it’s a marathon”¹⁰



“Stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection that you cannot do your job or that you are weak”¹⁰

Minimize watching, reading or listening to news that causes you to feel anxious or distressed; seek information only from trusted sources”¹⁰

The sudden and near-constant stream of news reports about an outbreak can cause anyone to feel worried”¹⁰

Protect yourself and be supportive to others

Find opportunities to amplify positive and hopeful stories”¹⁰



Signposts

The following may provide additional sources of support or guidance which you may find of use or benefit;

- [COVID-19: Guidance for the public on mental health and wellbeing](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing/guidance-for-the-public-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-aspects-of-coronavirus-covid-19) - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing/guidance-for-the-public-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-aspects-of-coronavirus-covid-19>
- [MIND Coronavirus and your wellbeing](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/) - <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>
- [NHS 5 steps to mental wellbeing](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/) - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/>



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10. WHO publication, 12th March 2020, Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations During COVID-19 Outbreak, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>,(Accessed 30/03/2020)
11. GMC Good Medical Practice, <https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/good-medical-practice/domain-2---safety-and-quality#paragraph-28>, (Accessed 27/03/2020)
12. Images kindly provided by Si Watts. Image one, Dovje, Slovenia, image two Lake Matheson, South Island NZ, Image three Coromandel, North Island, NZ





Support for students

We are committed to supporting all of our students regardless of circumstances. We know that the current situation with Covid-19 is a particularly worrying time for some of you and may impact on your health and wellbeing. Staff at St George's are still working and wish to support students even if this is done remotely.

- **The Student Life Centre** is still available remotely for practical needs (studentlifecentre@sgul.ac.uk or 020 8266 6344)
- **The Counselling Service** are offering remote appointments. To arrange an appointment, please email counselling@sgul.ac.uk
- Support from the **Students' Union** is also being offered remotely by Lon Teija (Welfare Advisor) and Beth Ward (Students' Union VP for Welfare). Check updates at <https://www.sgsu.org.uk/covid/> for ways to get in touch and to find out more about Students' Union support.
- If you have been seeing **Occupational Health** for any reason, they will also continue to offer appointments by phone.
- You can contact your **personal tutor**. Please note that many of our personal tutors are also clinicians who may be pulled into support the NHS at this time of intense pressure on their services. Each programme team should be in touch with advice on the situation within your course. They will support you if a temporary tutor needs to be assigned.
- As well as your usual social media accounts, you can use **university online tools** for online chats (e.g. [Big White Wall](#) and [Student Minds](#))

In addition to University services and tools, there is also a lot of advice available through various media about how best to look after your health and wellbeing during the pandemic. The resources listed below offer good quality advice.

- [Practical advice from MIND](#) about staying at home, social distancing and how to cope if you are anxious or worried.
- Information and practical worksheets for managing anxiety and worry during the pandemic: "[Guide to living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty](#)" (Psychology Tools PDF)