

Supporting patients and families during COVID-19

April 8, 2020

In times of increased stress and uncertainty, it is valuable to take a moment to reflect on self-care and communication techniques that may help to manage the many demands and emotions experienced.

During this time, feelings of isolation, lack of control, disruption in identity and routine, and feelings of grief and uncertainty are common among our staff, patients/clients/residents, families, and the wider community.

Taking care of yourself

We recognize that you may also be worried about your own health and that of your families. Staff well-being continues to be one of our top priorities as we move through these uncertain times together, and we thank you for your coordinated effort and continuous commitment.

Communicating your needs

Taking time for team huddles, rounding and individual check-ins allows the opportunity for you to not only share your feelings but also to offer higher quality, holistic care. Defining your boundaries and being aware of your triggers can prevent getting drawn into a conflict. Simply stating your feelings helps others understand your point-of-view and can improve collaboration among the group.

Communicating with families, friends and supports

Establish a strategy for support. When telling a family member that they cannot be present with their loved one or delivering other bad news, it is important to have a plan for available options and resources. *Talking about what you can do, not only about what you can't do* may help to alleviate feelings of helplessness. Families may be worried their loved one will not receive appropriate medical care if they are not there to advocate for them. (See 'Strategies for Supporting Patients and Families during COVID-19 below.)

Assess Understanding. Determine the amount of information known regarding the concern or how much information is desired by asking open-ended questions. Validate the person's emotions and experiences and set the stage to allow the patient and family to emotionally brace for the new or information: "Unfortunately, I have some bad news to share with you" or "I am sorry to tell you..."

Empathize. Exploring and validating emotions will work to establish a sense of trust and togetherness to facilitate coping for all. Patients, clients, residents and their families may have emotional responses that vary from silence to anger, confusion, or crying. Be aware that times of stress are particularly challenging for those with pre-existing mental health issues. Respond with empathy, acknowledge feelings of frustration and refer to appropriate services and resources for team-based support.

Maintain your calm. Increasing your awareness of your breathing and shifting to more abdominal breathing will help to reduce stress and tension. Find balance with adequate sleep, nutritious food, walks, journaling and meditation. Being aware of your emotions and remaining nonjudgmental allows for reflection and more clarity in problem solving.

Communication Skills in Action

- Share the “bad news” including the “why” behind the decision
- Acknowledge their emotion and express sympathy for the impact this is having on them
- Remind them “why” we are taking this action – to protect health and safety
- Provide options and alternatives
- Reassure them that their loved one is being well-cared-for
- Thank them for their understanding and patience

Strategies for supporting patients, clients, residents and their families during COVID-19 visitation restrictions

- Suggest a family member bring any important patient/client/resident items to the main entrance, in a bag clearly marked with the patient’s name and room number. Encourage them to choose wisely as the fewer items brought in means the fewer germs go back home.
- Ask family members if there is anything important they want to share about the patient to help improve care plans.
- Create a plan for when patients and families may call for updates or when they will be contacted by a staff member.
- Encourage connection with the patient though their room phone or personal device, with texting, video call such as FaceTime, Skype, Facebook messenger or Zoom meetings.
- Consider utilizing telephonic family meetings, including the appropriate family member during bedside shift report, and rounding. Please be flexible with requests to use personal audio and video devices to bring families who are not allowed to visit into conversation such as medical updates, shared decision making, and discharge planning.

Potential scenarios & responses

Potential scenario	Responses
What do you mean, I can’t visit my dad? He needs to see me. He will be very upset if he doesn’t. I help him move around and brush his teeth, and there are items he needs me to bring him. He isn’t sick with the virus. I am not sick. Why can’t you just test us and let me in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understand that you are worried about your dad. • I am very sorry, but we need to protect both his health and safety and yours as well as our staff. • We are living through a very difficult time and I understand these changes are not easy, but they are in place for everyone’s safety – including yours and your dad’s. • Please be reassured that he is being well-cared for. • We are limiting testing and cannot test anyone who is not showing symptoms. • During these visitation restrictions, here is what we can do to ensure that you remain connected with your dad while he is here with us. (Refer to strategies above)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know that this is very difficult for you and your Dad. I wish it was different. Thank you for your understanding and partnership while we do everything possible to stop the spread of this infection.
<p>Don't tell me I can't see my wife. I'm going to move her out of here if I can't stay with her. Call her doctor now. I don't need this.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am hearing that you are angry with the visitation restrictions. • I am very sorry that you are being separated from each other at this time. The visitation restrictions are in place to help us protect the health of our patients/clients/residents as well as our staff and physicians. • We certainly don't want you to remove her from our care, and we can assure you that she is being well-cared for. • Are there specific concerns you would like me to discuss with your wife's doctor or nurse? I am happy to call them and let them know that you would like to talk. • In the meantime, let's talk about what we can do to keep you connected with our wife. (Refer to strategies above)
<p>My sister doesn't speak English. She doesn't understand what the nurses are saying. I need to be there to calm her down and help her describe her needs. Please let me see her.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understand that you are worried that your sister will not be able to communicate her needs and that she will not receive the proper care. • I am very sorry that we need to restrict visitation due to COVID-19. • Please tell me more about your sister and what worries you most. • We provide free language services to people whose primary language is not English, including qualified interpreters. • We can set up a telephone call so you may be present when her doctor is discussing her health and plan of care. (Refer to strategies above)