



Supportive Practices for Mental Health Professionals During Pandemic-Related Social Distancing

Social distancing is the deliberate increasing of physical space between people to stop or slow down the spread of a highly contagious illness. It is a strategy sometimes recommended by public health officials during pandemics. For mental health professionals, the challenges that accompany social distancing can place significant roadblocks to daily work. Some agencies and organizations may struggle to continue to provide critical services while also protecting employees' health.

Social Distancing for Mental Health Professionals – Common Challenges

- Hopelessness, frustration, or feeling overwhelmed by not being able to serve the persons they are tasked to help.
- Mental health and helping professionals often serve underserved and/or historically marginalized populations who are often more vulnerable in times of pandemic. Not being able to provide critical services to these at-risk populations can activate feelings of hopelessness, instability, and lack of control.
- Mental health professionals are often in the service of people; however, the very tool used to manage the spread of a pandemic — social distancing — can increase feelings of loneliness, which is linked to depression.
- Feelings of anxiety, worry, or fear for self, family, friends, and clients are common responses in a time of uncertainty. In moments of increased or sustained uncertainty, trauma responses such as emotional dysregulation, hypervigilance, and changes in mood, may be (re)activated.

However, there are strategies available for mental health professionals to address the stress of isolation. During periods of social distancing, it is important to re-establish and develop balance and connection under a new set of circumstances. When facing challenges — particularly ones related to a pandemic, such as stress, illness, or trauma — balance can help restore feelings of control, and connection can counter feelings of loneliness.

Supporting Wellness, Balance, and Connection

- **Practice Self-Compassion:** According to self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff, “Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards yourself when you are having a difficult time, fail, or notice something you don’t like about yourself. Instead of just ignoring your pain, stop to tell yourself, ‘This is really difficult right now.’”¹ The following are ways to practice self-compassion and care for oneself.
 - Be gentle with yourself instead of judging yourself and your work ethic in a situation that you have little to no control over.
 - Understand the shared common experience of vulnerability and imperfection is part of our humanity. It unites us, and links us to the mental health profession.
 - Acknowledge the very real challenges to your work and your clients, and do not exaggerate or suppress these feelings. Suppressing feelings or diving deeper into work and crisis response does not leave room for self-compassion.

¹ www.self-compassion.org

- **Establish Routines and Habits:** Social distancing may disrupt our routines and habits. This can impact emotional, social, and physical wellness. Setting intentional routines and habits that support our needs and align with our values is one way to foster resilience.
- **Get Outside:** Schedule and set alarms to remind you to go outside. Your body produces Vitamin D when exposed to sunlight, and access to sunlight is proven to improve mood.
- **Form Small Groups:** Meet your neighbor or schedule small workgroups with office colleagues.
- **Foster Spirituality:** Spirituality provides connection and is a critical component of one's life. It is embraced in many public health settings as an important tool to promote wellness.
- **Schedule Meetings Over Video Chat:** Use online tools with video conferencing capabilities, like Zoom or Skype, for meetings. Other online tools, such as Microsoft Teams, also allow for increased collaboration and messaging. Also, standardize a time to check-in and get face time with family, friends, and colleagues.
- **Practice Self Care:** Listen to music, chat with a friend, and be sure to take breaks from listening to and watching the news.
- **Exercise:** Exercise to the capacity that you can. Supporting your physical health and wellbeing is a large part of managing your mental health.

Supporting the Mental Health Workforce – Considerations for Supervisors

- **Acknowledge and Affirm:** Everyone experiences pandemics in the ways that reflect their roles and identities. As such, there will be inequitable burdens placed on staff who are caregiving and/or are vulnerable to the changes stemming from economic impacts of the pandemic. Acknowledging, affirming, and supporting staff's roles and challenges at a time of a pandemic is critical.
- **Express Empathy:** Empathy helps us build social connections and support emotional regulation, and encourages us to help others. Engaging in organizational empathy can communicate to staff and community stakeholders the organization's commitment to its mission in serving its clients and supporting its staff through the uncertainty.
- **Acknowledge Challenges Unique to the Profession:** Creating a shared language and a space for examining common experiences breaks isolation and supports staff in their own lived experiences.
- **Create a Space for Feelings — Especially Uncomfortable Ones:** Let staff know they are not alone in feeling the discomfort of uncertainty, and work collectively to handle the challenges that are in your power to address.
- **Encourage Online Community:** Create a playful online space to break up the social isolation. Be sure that the technology is available for staff to feel supported by one another.
- **Communicate Clearly and Often:** If you do not know answers to questions, own up to it and commit to finding the answer. Honestly in times of uncertainty is crucial to building trust and honoring transparency.
- **Model Self Care:** Support behavioral health by encouraging and modeling good self-care and community-care. While self-care is about the individual caring for their own needs, community care is focused on the collective. It refers to taking care of people together, from basic physical needs to psychological and spiritual ones. This can be accomplished on or offline.
- **Check In Often:** Acknowledge that messages can get lost in large institutions. Take time to touch base and make sure that information is getting through to your team to reinforce clarity and messaging.
- **Encourage Grounding Behavior:** Ground your team in what they can control and exercise voice and choice over. In a time of uncertainty, it is important to feel empowered in what you can control. Build more space for choice in projects and deliverables.
- **Express Gratitude:** It can be a challenge to remember to acknowledge people at a time when social distancing has disrupted the regular flow of work. Create a time and space for recognition by making a regular practice of acknowledging and affirming the work of staff.

For more information, please visit our website (mhffcnetwork.org/southsouthwest), or contact Nadia Kalinchuk Maynard, Trauma-Informed Care Specialist (Nadia.Kalinchuk@austin.utexas.edu).