



# Mental Health Tips for Doctors

The Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists



Working in the medical profession brings upon some unique challenges for mental health. A local survey conducted by the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine has shown that among the respondents, over 70% of young doctors reported burnout. When your work is focused on caring for others, it is all the more important that you are able to look after your own well-being. In this toolkit, we aim to offer some advice to doctors who are feeling mentally and emotionally exhausted.

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## Looking after your emotional health

### Addressing negative cognitions::

Common negative thoughts and feelings when working in the frontline include feelings of helplessness due to excessive workload, guilty thoughts over not treating patients and family members well, anger and frustration towards patients and their relatives, and the hospital management for placing you in this difficult situation.

It may be tempting to suppress these emotions and numb yourself with more work, but this will not be sustainable in the long run. Own up to these negative cognitions; they are perfectly reasonable given the unusual circumstance, and by no means reflect on you as an unprofessional healthcare staff.



### Validate yourself and each other:

To validate is to appreciate that your thoughts, emotions and behaviour are understandable given a particular situation. Support and encourage your teammates, especially those who have expressed self-blame over minor mistakes that have inevitably occurred. Remind yourself that no one is perfect and that everyone has his or her limits. Focus on what you can control. Pay attention to things that are going well. Share and celebrate the successes or small wins.



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## Looking after your emotional health

### Time out:

If your emotions become difficult to contain, take a short break from the source of stress. For instance, if your feeling of frustration over a patient or relative becomes difficult to contain, leave the situation briefly to calm down before returning to your duties.



Try not to dwell on past mistakes or future worries, but learn to focus on the present moment. Take a short break from work. Have a light-hearted chat with your companions, and make sure to look after your body through good rest, exercise and relaxation.

### Keep in touch with family and friends:

Ensure regular communication with friends, family and colleagues. Call your family members on a daily basis.

Keep your loved ones well informed and ask how they are doing. This reduces the sense of isolation even when you are not physically with them.



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## Looking after your emotional health

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a specific kind of practice in which you:

1. Become fully aware of your present moment – your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations – and can observe them without judgement or attempts at changing them
2. Focus on one thing at a time, be it a sensation, an action, or an emotion

By adopting the skill of mindfulness, we can be more aware of our inner state of mind, learn how to be non-judgemental and compassionate towards ourselves, and achieve an internal sense of peace.



As it is much easier to follow audio instead of written instructions while practicing mindfulness, the following link from Oasis of the Hospital Authority is one of the resources that can be referred to:

[https://oasis.ha.org.hk/b5\\_news\\_details.aspx?newsid=1036](https://oasis.ha.org.hk/b5_news_details.aspx?newsid=1036)

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## Looking after your physical health

### Sleep hygiene

Refrain from eating heavy meals or drinking excessive fluids before sleeping. Put aside all electronic devices, and dim the lights when resting.



Refrain from counting your hours of sleep or dwelling on the quality of your sleep the night before. If you had a poor night's sleep and need a short afternoon nap the following day, try to limit it to around 30 minutes. Avoid non-sleep related activities in bed.

### Balanced diet

Make sure you maintain a balanced diet of protein, fat and carbohydrates. Stick to regular meal patterns, even if you work shifts. Keep well hydrated, and do not be tempted to skip meals or restrict your fluid intake to save time or avoid toilet breaks.

Consume foods that are easy to digest; dyspepsia is more prone to occur if you are in a constant state of tension.



### Regular exercise

Stay physically active. Engage in regular exercise several times each week. Take part in activities that you enjoy. Your mind and body are interconnected. Physical exercise can help reduce stress and enhance resilience.



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## Suggested relaxation exercises

### Deep breathing exercise

- ◆ Position yourself comfortably in bed.
- ◆ Place one hand on your stomach, and another on your chest.
- ◆ Inhale slowly through your nose, until your lungs are fully expanded, and hold your breath for 1-2 seconds.
- ◆ Exhale slowly through your lips. Image all the stress expelling from your body as you breathe out and relax.
- ◆ Feel how the hand on your stomach rises as you inhale, and how it falls as you exhale.
- ◆ Breathe slowly and steadily.
- ◆ You should feel the ease in tension after repeating this for 3-5 times.
- ◆ Consider doing this exercise for 10 minutes while listening to relaxing music. You may choose to do this in the morning when you wake up and before you go to sleep at night.

### The 'Safe Space'

Create a mental image of a safe haven for yourself, be it your bed at home, a small room, or a little cottage etc.

Use your internal senses to visualise and enter into that haven.

In this process, let your mind feel safe and unwind. Remind yourself that amidst the chaos of work, there is still a quiet, undisturbed space within yourself to which you can withdraw.



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## Suggested relaxation exercises

### Progressive muscle relaxation

- ◆ This is done by tensing up and then relaxing one muscle group at a time.
- ◆ Focus on how each part of your body gradually relaxes.
- ◆ Breathe in, and as you do, tense up the muscles of a particular part of your body, and hold that tension for 5 seconds.
- ◆ Breathe out, gradually relaxing your muscles, taking 15 seconds for yourself to feel completely relaxed.
- ◆ During the tensing of that part of your body, keep your other muscle groups completely relaxed.
- ◆ Consider tensing the relaxing your muscles in the following order: start with your dominant hand, your forearm and biceps, then your non dominant hand, forearm and biceps, then your forehead, orbital muscles, neck, back, chest, abdomen, hips, thighs, calves, and feet.
- ◆ Repeat the tensing and relaxing of each muscle group twice.



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## Communicating with patients and relatives

Effective communication while working under pressure can be challenging. Trying to keep a calm and professional demeanour in the face of frightened or frustrated patients is no easy task, especially when you yourself are feeling the same way.



Use short and concise phrases when talking with patients and relatives. Pause frequently and check with them to see if they can follow you. Remember that patients and their relatives are undergoing a highly distressing experience in which they feel completely vulnerable and helpless. Try your best to be patient with them, and seek the support of another colleague if you feel your own emotions difficult to contain.

## Getting help

Remember, feeling stressed out is by no means a reflection of a lower level of competence as a healthcare professional or a lower level of resilience as a person. In order to look after your patients well, you must first look after yourself, both mentally and physically. If you feel overwhelmed, know that there are ways to get support. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but rather, a sign of strength and self-awareness.

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Talk to your colleagues, your seniors, or someone else that you trust about your feelings, concerns and difficulties. Your peers can share your burden and make you feel less alone in your struggles. Your seniors will understand you more and know how to support you better. Be compassionate to yourself and others. It is OK to say you are not OK.

For staff working in Hospital Authority, Oasis - Centre for Personal Growth & Crisis Intervention, the Critical Incident Support Team (CIST) and the Critical Incident Psychological Services (CIPS) Centre are available in all HA clusters to provide staff with psychological services. Please refer to your cluster's information on how to contact them. For general enquiries regarding Oasis, please call 2300 8619 or visit their website: <https://oasis.ha.org.hk/>

For staff working outside of the Hospital Authority, you may seek professional assistance from your own family doctor, clinical psychologists or psychiatrists for assessment and consultation.

- List of Clinical Psychologists working in Non-Government Organizations & Private Practicing is available at the website of The Hong Kong Psychological Society: <https://hkps-dcp.org.hk/en/home-en/member-directory-en?page=3>
- List of Private Psychiatrists practicing in Hong Kong is available at the website of the Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists: [https://www.hkpsych.org.hk/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=63&Itemid=302&lang=en](https://www.hkpsych.org.hk/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=63&Itemid=302&lang=en)

### References

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