



Well@Work Podcast

Episode 12: Psychological First Aid

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is being funded by a grant from SAMHSA. In this episode Dr. Scott LaJoie from the University of Louisville discusses how Psychological First Aid can help you provide care to your co-workers when they need it the most.

Hello, I'm Dr. Scott LaJoie, a behavioral scientist and professor in the school of Public Health at the University of Louisville. Thank you for taking the time today to listen to this short podcast. It is our hope that you will find some information about Psychological First Aid that enables you to provide compassionate care for your co-workers and for yourself during this pandemic. Most health care professionals, the doctors, nurses, support staff and myriad others who run our hospitals are experiencing waves of intense pressure and stress with intermittent periods with few cases but worries of the next surge. This prolonged stress wears down the psychological defense mechanisms healthcare professionals have built up. Some providers are working within crowded ICUs and watching their patients' health worsen despite their best efforts. Patients who recover often do so with lasting health consequences, and those patients who don't recover die in ways that are uncommon in our medical system: alone and isolated. You may have seen the effects of prolonged stress in your coworkers or even in yourself. The effects can be hard to miss and typically include physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes. These stress responses are most likely to occur when the event is unexpected, when it causes many deaths, lasts over long periods of time, the etiology is unknown, and the event is impacting a large area. Psychological first aid is a humane and caring approach to providing psychosocial support to people in distress, following a traumatic event, disaster, or emergency. Application of basic principles of Psychological First Aid can promote natural and full recovery. When people are under stress, they need to feel safe, they need to feel connected, and cared for.

Psychological first aid is simple to do and likely comes natural to most caregivers. Psychological first aid does not require mental health professionals. It can be as simple as listening with empathy to your stressed out co-worker and getting her some food and water if she needs it. Let's look at the basic steps of psychological first aid. First, promote safety. Ensure your co-workers basic survival needs are met, including food and water, warmth, and housing. Be sure they aren't in any danger from the emergency or from themselves. If they are in danger, it's your responsibility to help remove the threat. Second, provide calm and comfort. You might need to get them away from the source of stress. For example, if possible, and even if only for a short period of time, get them away from the hospital. Let them talk. Your job is to listen without judgment to whatever they are willing to share. Don't probe, they'll open up if and when they want to. Just be there for them, be present. Third, promote connectedness. Help them stay in touch with their loved ones; make them aware of disaster or employee support services. You might even encourage them to love on their pets a little bit more. Fourth, promote self-empowerment. People in distress feel out of control and in ongoing disasters or emergencies, there may be few things that can be controlled, but you can help them identify what they can control. Help them find practical ways to regain as much normalcy as possible.

With the pandemic, special considerations are necessary for responding with psychological first aid to health care workers who are distressed. The biggest concern most health care workers will have is safety. They want assurances that their loved ones are safe, they want assurances that they themselves

are safe. Here's where you remind them of their training and experience with infection control. Remind them that they've kept themselves and their loved ones safe in the past. Provide them simple evidence-based guidelines for how to transition from work to home. Encourage them to practice the same infection control procedures at home as they do at the hospital. You can't guarantee their safety, but you can empower them to lower the risk of exposure.

Some people will feel a greater sense of control when they have up-to-date information about the pandemic and know what their what steps their employers are taking to keep them, their loved ones, and their patients as safe as possible. You can help your co-worker find this information, if that's what they need. Think of psychological first aid as triage, use your knowledge, training, and common sense to recognize when your co-worker is under extreme distress. If you notice they are using maladaptive coping strategies that can worsen their situation, such as taking unnecessary risks, abusing substances, or taking their fear and anger out on their family, refer them to professional help. If their psychological symptoms are significantly more intense than what other health care workers in similar situations are experiencing, refer them to professional help. If they are telling you they intend to self-harm or harm others, believe them and refer them to professional help. And by refer, I mean help them make the appointment, provide them with transportation, stay with them as they call the hotline, do all you can to see that they get the professional help they need.

Finally, a word of caution. You are human and are likely experiencing similar levels of stress as your coworkers. There is a "Cost of Caring", as Charles Figley calls it, you should monitor your own reactions to the stress. If you are suffering from distress, you might not be able to provide psychological first aid without further damaging your own well-being. Compassion fatigue for your patients or for your co-workers is a real threat if you don't practice self-care. Be cognizant of your own health and mental well-being. If the stress is getting to you, let someone else administer psychological first aid to you. Thank you for listening, we hope this information on psychological first aid has been helpful to you, and for your coworkers.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website and of course stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.