

# How to help essential workers avoid burnout

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We are six weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic life and our front line workers are growing weary.

Not only are our essential personnel—doctors, nurses, grocery store cashiers, and transportation workers—working under intense pressure to

keep the world running and save lives, they have the extra-added stress of trying not to contract the [coronavirus](#). Or worse, bringing the virus home to their loved ones.

The impact of living under such professional and emotional strain is starting to become evident. On Monday, a top emergency room surgeon at New York-Presbyterian Allen Hospital hospital died by suicide. Dr. Lorna M. Breen, the medical director in the hospital's emergency room department, didn't have a history of mental illness, according to her father. But Breen recently described to her family how taxing it was to witness the toll the coronavirus took on her patients. "She tried to do her job, and it killed her," said Breen's father, Dr. Phillip C. Breen.

"It's a different kind of work pressure, one that maybe hard for others to understand," said Dr. Rochelle Teachy, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania Primary care in Delaware County. You are fearful for your health, your household's health and your contact's health. Everyday. That's a lot to handle," Teachy said.

A big stress factor lies in the unknowns, said Dr. Lynette Charity, an Arizona-based physician who lectures on the effect of mental stress and burn out on physicians. We don't fully understand how the virus is transmitted. Symptoms vary from person to person. It's not clear how long it will take to develop a vaccine. With the number of confirmed U.S. cases at more than one million and the death toll nationwide topping 56,000, we're still in the middle of this crisis even as states make plans to reopen. "Our essential workers are at the end of their rope," Charity said.

There are, however, things we can do to help the front line workers in our lives. Here are some ideas to help you help them cope.

Have you noticed your friend or loved one, who is on the front lines every day, is becoming more forgetful? Has his hygiene changed or

slipped? Is she spending too much time alone? These are all signs that his or her mental health may be comprised, Charity said. "Burnout is a mental exhaustion and when people lose interest in taking care of themselves, it's time to pay attention." Don't, however, launch into a series of 20 questions, because that will only make them shut down more, Charity cautions. Instead, let them know you are there for them. Simply ask: "Are you okay?" If they do open up, do more listening than talking. "It's important that people who are on these front lines have their concerns heard."

If you fear a true mental health crisis is underway, call the city's 24-hour crisis hotline at 215-685-6440. You can also call the 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Hot Line 800-273-8255.

When Kayleigh Lawrence gets home from work as registered nurse at Virtua Willingboro Hospital, she often times just wants to take a shower, eat and retreat to her room. "Sometimes I just need to be silent," said Lawrence. The coronavirus' intensified every aspect of her job. Each day she must put on layers of protective gear to help her patients and if she's not careful in the removal, she is at risk of exposing herself. "We are so overwhelmed that we need a delicate balance of care that includes hearing us out, but also letting us be quiet," Lawrence said.

The essential worker in your life should not be the one to do the grocery shopping, replacing the toilet paper or filling up the car up with gas, or picking up the prescriptions, Charity said. "This is not the time to add responsibility to their loads," Charity said.

Karen Driben and her husband, Ian Driben, both veterinarians who live in Vorhees, have been working the full six weeks. They've arranged their schedules so someone is home with their two kids while the other one works. The one who stays home, Karen Driben said, usually runs the errands and cooks so the other can get ample rest. Balance is important

to maintaining sanity in their household, Driben said. "We are on high alert all of the time," Driben said. "One minute people are seemingly healthy and then they are real sick and since we are dealing with these stresses day in and day out we have to make sure that each of us has time to compress."

It seems like a small thing, said DuJuan Scott, a conductor on SEPTA regional rail, but when I get home, it would be nice to have a hot meal ready. If you live with an essential worker—whether you're their spouse, sibling, parent or child—you should have their lounge wear ready for them so they can slip into it as soon as they get out of the shower. "Have something they like ready for them: a desert something they really love when they come through that door to make them smile," Charity said. "When they are out there working, people just see a body working for the them. No one sees who they are really are. So you—their family and friends have to appreciate them." And probably the most important thing you can do is leave a mask and gloves by their keys so they can grab it and go.

If you don't live with them, but still want to support, send them a pizza, or a lasagne, or cookies: something to make them feel like they're getting the hug you can't give them in person right now.

Schedule a game night. Go for a walk in the park (away from others). Work on a puzzle together. Make a fun meal together. "When people are distraught, it helps to bring them back to a pleasant moment." Charity says. And by working in downtime you are effectively telling them not to sweat the small stuff, because play in this moment is more important than finishing the basement or any other 'honey do' chores on the list. "You want to keep that person in your life healthy, not just physically but mentally."

"Some of the nicest notes of encouragement I got were short texts from

friends," said Rebecca Jacobs, a nurse at Jefferson Health in Vorhees. Scott said that [phone calls](#) from friends and family have brightened his day because it shows that people care. "We feel like no one cares about us." For friends that don't live with you, you might want to send a thank you card with a gift card to a favorite local restaurant, Charity said. Or maybe put together a care package of the things they need: like the ingredients of an easy to make dinner, Clorox wipes and toilet paper. "Heroes need help too," Charity said. "It's the very least we can do to thank them for keeping our new normal running steady."

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