

Pandemic stress daunting for health professionals

Turmoil and upheaval raise levels of anxiety, fear and isolation. Doctors heed their advice to patients: Meditate, rest, exercise and remember: 'We will get through this.'

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A nurse helps a doctor don personal protective equipment before performing a procedure on a Covid patient at Regional Medical Center on May 21, 2020, in San Jose, Calif. Santa Clara County, where this hospital is located, had the earliest known Covid-related deaths in the United States. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)



Written By Angie Chatman

Every day begins with a 10-minute meditation for Dr. Marcela Almeida.

“I have to prioritize my own mental health,” said the psychiatrist, “before I can even think about my patients.”

Almeida specializes in women’s health and is on the staff at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, which is a teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School. “I have always done this,” she said about meditation. “Now (during the pandemic), it’s imperative.”

In 2018, [Locum](#) – an agency dedicated to doctors, nurses and other medical professionals who freelance in hospitals and medical practices worldwide – surveyed more than 3,700 physicians in various specialties. The survey showed that while more than half of those physicians reported their workload had affected their mental health, only 17% sought help. Two-thirds said they would not consider meeting with a mental health professional at all.



Dr. Marcela Almeida, a psychiatrist who specializes in women’s mental health and is on the staff at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, begins each day with a meditation. “I have always done this,” she said about meditation. “Now (during the pandemic), it’s imperative.” (Photo courtesy of Dr. Marcela Almeida)

In this same study, 53% of the physicians felt mental health is a taboo subject because of the stigma of mental illness in the medical community, fears of professional reprisal and ultimate loss of a medical license. These same themes were cited in the case of Dr. Lorna Breen, who supervised the emergency room at New York City’s Presbyterian Allen Hospital, and [died by suicide on April 26, 2020](#).

“Doctors are trained to witness death and dying, but it’s never been on this scale, even for those who served in war zones,” Almeida said.

But the constant barrage of deaths is overwhelming. Plus, she said, the virus is unpredictable. “There are 40-year-olds with no comorbidities (meaning two or more serious medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes) who don’t survive,” she said, “and 74-year-olds with a litany of ailments who walk out after a few days.

“It’s frustrating. We feel helpless,” Almeida said.

Another constant source of anxiety for physicians and other medical professionals is the risk of spreading the virus to others. J. Anthony Parchue, a retina surgeon in Southlake, Texas, near Dallas, fears for his loved ones.

“My No. 1 fear is contracting the virus and bringing it home to my family,” Parchue said. “At the end of the day, I go from the garage to the laundry room and remove everything – keys, wallet, glasses, pens, lab coat, scrubs – and sanitize them. Then I use the back stairs to (get to the bathroom and) shower.”



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Some physicians said the lack of reliable child care amplifies the challenges they’ve been enduring for more than a year.

“There’s no longer a separation between work and home,” said Tina Charest, a family medicine practitioner with offices in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. “(For example) [I’m trying to talk to a patient using telehealth](#) while also trying to get my kid situated on Zoom. It’s challenging.”

Charest and her husband, a cardiologist, have two daughters ages 4 and 7. The couple has been able to work out schedules that allow them to work and take care of their children. “I feel our girls have had to grow up much too fast,” Charest said. “And yet, I know these are extraordinary circumstances, and as a mom, I’ve given myself a pass.”

Almeida considers herself fortunate because her three children’s schools have remained open two days a week until lunch. “I can’t leave my office to go get my children,” she said. “We’ve had to hire someone to pick them up from school on those days.”

To cope with the exhaustion, despair and uncertainty of the pandemic, medical professionals have turned not only to meditation (Almeida’s preference) but other forms of stress release.

Emily Swilling, a pediatrician who is part of a large practice with five offices along the north shore of Massachusetts, decompresses by making furniture, sewing, and painting. She also has taken on home-improvement projects.

For Charest, running is the stress reliever of choice. Before Covid-19, she was training for a marathon. “For me, running is like meditation,” she explained. “I’m out in nature, and (the rhythmic motion) gets me completely out of my head.”

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