

Megan ([00:03](#)):

Please standby. We are about to begin. Thank you for joining us for today's webinar, "Healthcare Workers, Self Care in Stressful Times," brought to you by Cigna. Please note that copies of the presentation slides and handouts are available for download in the dropdown box on the lower left side of the player window.

Megan ([00:23](#)):

Our presenter today is Karen King. Karen King has been a healthcare practitioner and trainer for over 15 years. In addition to her strong commitment to general physical health and wellbeing, she has also provided grief and loss, critical incident, and change management services to organizations for over 25 years. She has spoken for a variety of workplace groups, national and international professional conferences and radio programs. And now, Ms. Karen King.

Karen King ([00:52](#)):

Thanks so much, Megan. I'm delighted to be able to present this material to you. Ah, you know, w- we are living in a very difficult time, and the world continues to reel from the impact of COVID-19, ah, the pandemic. And- And we are all affected by it, um, whether you're directly involved in patient care or- or for some of the people who are in other departments. Everyone is affected, um, not only for their personal concerns, but worries about their friends and families, ah, certainly along with the pressures from work, and the upended norms of everyday life.

Karen King ([01:34](#)):

It's widely recognized that those of you on the healthcare frontline are among those who are most deeply impacted. And the scope of the current normal, so to speak, workday encompasses risks and stressors, that most of us would struggle with to manage. While much of these, ah, circumstances are beyond our control, we can explore and try to find, ah, some of the realities of the stress and shift our response to it, ways to be able to improve our coping. And that's what I hope to accomplish today.

Karen King ([02:16](#)):

I'll be talking about the impact of COVID-19, ah, on healthcare workers. And I'll go over some concrete moves that you can make to address the stress. I'll share some techniques for reclaiming emotional balance, and we'll explore strategies for prioritizing your self care, because we really do need to bump that up to the top of- of the list, and often it falls by the wayside.

Karen King ([02:46](#)):

All right, so we're here living in these extraordinary times, um, and you're healthcare workers, you're giving care and- and what we, you know, it's what we do. And your skills and dedication remain comforting- a comforting constant in extraordinary times. But life today and the work that you do look different, and some of those differences can be escalating sources of stress. While situations may vary across the country and even from hospital to hospital in the same stity- city, as well as in other settings, um, the areas of concern for everyone, including the- the healthcare workers, ah, is remains the same.

Karen King ([03:34](#)):

Many are related to the workplace changes, workloads that are building, ah, protocols that are influx and changing every day. Some are struggling with shortages of protective materials, equipment, ah,

shortages of staff, among other challenges. And, though, the risk of infection is always present on the job in this situation, fears for your safety, for your patients and that of your family are- are really more in the top of our minds. And the worry that you might in fact harm someone, that alone can be overwhelming.

Karen King (04:17):

So this can be worsened by the stigma, and which I'll mention again later, um, because as healthcare workers, you may be experiencing avoidance from others who fear the infection. I won't belabor those challenges. Um, we know that they're there, and you're still showing up each day, despite them. It's what you do. But it's not an understatement to say that vulnerability and reduced sense of control, coupled with the share of physical demands and om- upended daily life routines is a recipe for extraordinary stress.

Karen King (04:58):

And it's stress that can quickly take an emotional toll. A cross sectional survey of the COVID-19 caregivers that was done in Wuhan, China found that 70% had already reported psychological distress back in January, which was very early in the crisis for them. The investment in what you do and prioritizing the needs of others, it can sometimes keep caregivers from acknowledging and effectively addressing, ah, the stress that you're experiencing. But, no one is immune from the impact.

Karen King (05:35):

And the odds are, that as much as the words in the first column that you see here on the slide, list- that list may very well describe you, things like being capable, skilled, caring, proud. You'll see that some of the words in the second column are- are likely growing feelings as well, worry, frustration, exhaustion. And we can't ignore that.

Karen King (06:00):

So that's where we want to put the emphasis today. I want you to acknowledge that self care really matters. And, while I'm sure that you know the importance of self care and de-stressing, the question is how can you make it a priority? Can you really practice it?

Karen King (06:21):

So first we have to be attuned to it. And that means noticing when stress, tension, and exhaustion are building to an unmanageable level. Where do you feel it? Are you experiencing insomnia, headaches, irritability, or is it something else? Maybe you dismissed the effects or will yourself to just power through it. We have to take our own emotional temperature from time to time. And if it's spiking with anxiety or distress, those can be signs that we shouldn't ignore. This is when it's time to take action.

Karen King (07:00):

So, what will motivate you to respond with some self care? Maybe it's being a role model for your coworkers or your peers and family. Maybe it's knowing how damaging stress can be, how much it can undercut your physical and emotional resources and your ability to keep showing up. Or maybe it's an extension of the selflessness that defines your day. "What would happen to my patients if something happened to me?"

Karen King ([07:30](#)):

They're most- You are the most valuable resource in this fight that we have. And many of us can identify with the reality that to care for others, we have to care for ourselves. But, do you? I encourage you to take time each day to remember what your motivation is, and think about your needs as well. Maybe in a quiet moment at the end of the day, or as you're energizing to start your shift, focus on the value of managing stress levels and recomitt to that goal. Then as the day unfolds, strive to take control of those things that you can. Committing to making daily self care, even in small ways, can help it to become a norm for you.

Karen King ([08:20](#)):

So let's now look at some of those moves. I'll start with some practical ways to relieve pressure, and then we'll look at mental and emotional strategies that can help you to feel more balanced. So, we're gonna be taking control, um, but that requires taking action. Thinking about it really is not the end goal. There are many unknowns in the situation that you're working in today, and what we do know is evolving day by day. Focusing on the unknown invites a worst case scenario kind of thinking, making it hard to implement solutions to problems in the here and now.

Karen King ([09:04](#)):

Just focus on small ways you can maintain some control of the situation, both at work and at home. Check for and take advantage of some of the low, low, and no cost supports that are available, ah, addressing life's demands. For example, you may be able to take advantage of services, like discounted car rentals, so that you have a means of getting to work, donated childcare. There are free meals and beverages, apps with meditation exercises that you can pull down on your phone. They help to get you better sleep and also provide stress management tools. There are even shoes and medical supplies that can be available to you at no cost.

Karen King ([09:50](#)):

So talk to your employer or your coworkers, or search online for programs and services that may be available to you. If- If you really are feeling pressed for time and thinking, "Oh, yeah, that'd be great if I had the ability to do that," ask someone that you know to do it for you, a family member or a close friend, many of whom are now at home in isolation, looking for something useful to do, and would be happy to help you.

Karen King ([10:20](#)):

Try to develop a routine that you're comfortable with to protect yourself and your loved ones, as well as others. Some healthcare professionals are using separate bedrooms and bathrooms so that they maintain a distance from family members or roommates. Some have even taken up separate residences. Many hotels are offering space to healthcare workers so that they can be separated and have a calm, quiet place in their downtime, and reducing their commute.

Karen King ([10:53](#)):

They're extraordinary measures, and while it may be difficult, making and implementing a plan to protect yourself and your family and those close to you can give you a sense of control over the outcome. And when we feel that we have control over something, we tend to be less stressed.

Karen King ([11:14](#)):

You wanna ensure that you're clear on the guideline. New information comes out all of the time, both from public health officials, local health organizations, and at your workplace. So make sure you have a clear understanding how these guidelines impact your daily work functions and processes. Staying informed as much as possible is another way to combat the anxiety that often accompanies uncertainty. You can feel like you know what is best at this moment.

Karen King ([11:46](#)):

And you wanna be assertive. And if you tend not to be that kind of person, this is a great time to exercise some energy in that direction. Being able to ask what you need. Know your limits. Communicate them. At work, recognize when you need a break or resources to satisfy your basic needs, or to provide protection. If there are tasks that are getting in the way of your work or personal commitment, ask if they can be delegated to other staff or put aside for now.

Karen King ([12:20](#)):

You wanna make every effort to limit your working hours to no more than 12 hour shifts, if that's at all possible, so that you have time to get a decent amount of- of- ah, quality sleep, as well as a little bit of downtime too- to work on meeting your own needs. Be assertive in your personal life as well. Ask for what you need from loved ones, and- and put up boundaries with them when that's needed.

Karen King ([12:49](#)):

We all need to find our footing, so I'll talk about that for a little bit. In addition to the immediate and basic needs, both at home and in the workplace, there's also the emotional impact of a situation like this one, which is basically traveling in uncharted territory, for the most part. And these needs are just as important to address.

Karen King ([13:14](#)):

You wanna remember why you were drawn to the healthcare profession in the first place. Largely, it's because we care deeply for others and we're invested in their healthcare. Consider yourself a warrior on the front lines of this fight, because that's what you are. And while everyone else is staying home, you put yourself in danger to take care of other people.

Karen King ([13:38](#)):

Put that remarkable sacrifice and bravery into perspective, and allow it to be a comfort to you when things seem stressful and overwhelming. Take time to remind yourself of the positive impact that you have, even when everything doesn't go well. It's not a perfect world, and there are unanswered questions. So everything is not going to go well every minute, but look for something positive every day, so that it motivates you to keep moving forward.

Karen King ([14:11](#)):

At the same time, it's important to maintain emotional balance with your work. You're fighting this unknown and unpredictable threat, and you may be doing so without normal staff or supplies. Ah, visitors are restricted, so you may be the only friendly face, and in- in the current circumstances it may only be friendly bright eyes that a patient gets to see. And that translates to a heavy emotional burden. You know, perhaps maybe even more difficult by the fears of your patients and their loved ones.

Karen King ([14:45](#)):

Um, you know, you are trying to connect. You're, kind of, a conduit for information, um, and you're representing family to your patients, and patients to their families. Try to maintain emotional boundaries to protect yourself. You're a provider of care and comfort, but you're not an absorber of pain or fear.

Karen King ([15:08](#)):

So try to identify some coping strategies that have worked for you before in times of stress. It's- This is an unprecedented situation for most, but think about how you've coped in stressful times in the past. You know, you might be talking to a friend on- on the phone, whether it's venting or just recounting a situation that occurred, taking a walk to clear your head, tapping into your own natural resiliency, the strength that you've brought to other challenges, you know, using your persistence and optimistic outlook or even your sense of humor, because even if the exact situation is different, those same strategies and strengths can be really helpful to you now.

Karen King ([15:55](#)):

And pace yourself. It's likely that you'll be, ah, ex- experienced changes to your work processes and higher workloads over a long period of time, and if you burn out too quickly, you won't be able to provide the care and attention that you need for your patients moving forward. And that's why it's important to prioritize your own health, right from the start, giving your body and mind, what they need to cope with these stressors, without reaching a tipping point, without reaching that- that place of burnout.

Karen King ([16:32](#)):

So let's take a look at building some, m- ah, mental boundaries. All right, this is a- another way to prepare yourself for the long-term stressors. It allows you to unplug from the day when you complete your shift. So you want to monitor any self taught that you- that you may, ah, that may prevent you from prioritizing self care. Things like, "You know, it's selfish for me to take a break. It's my job. I shouldn't feel this stress." And those kinds of things, you know, may sound familiar to you, but talk back to those thoughts, reminding yourself, "If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to give your best to your patients or others."

Karen King ([17:22](#)):

You wanna build some mental breaks into your day, even if it's just taking a moment to look out the window or bring a calming mental image into your mind, whatever that might be for you. It might be a hot bath or warm sunshine, ah, talking with your family. Bring that imagery into play for yourself. Take a few deep breaths in the midst of a busy day. Even, three good, calm, deep breaths can help cue your body's relaxation response by sending messages to your- to your brain that- that, "You're okay right now, you're gonna move forward."

Karen King ([18:01](#)):

You could refer to the Techniques for Relaxing Mind and Body handout, ah, for some simple breathing exercises that you can try. You'll see that accompanying today's program. And if all you remember is that even three good, deep, calm breaths, breathing in through your nose as deeply as you can and holding it for just a few seconds, and then blowing it gently out like you're blowing out birthday candles,

doing that three times is going to give your mind a message to calm. And it's with us all the time. You can do that anywhere, at any time.

Karen King ([18:42](#)):

You wanna stay informed on health updates, but you don't wanna be over-inundated, ah, with news exposure. You might try to limiting yourself to checking the news headlines just once or twice a day. Um, and make sure it's from reliable new sources. You should turn off the notifications to your phone that broadcast the latest headlines, because even if you don't have a chance to look at it, your mind goes to wondering, "What it is now?" So just turn it off, and check a couple times to make sure that you're abreast of what is most current.

Karen King ([19:18](#)):

Um, you wanna maybe by reflecting each day, looking for positivity, trying to identify just at least one thing that went well. You know, maybe it was a patient who was discharged or taken off a vent, or a procedure that went really smoothly. It could be just a single thank you that you received. It doesn't have to be a grand or dramatic experience. Just one small positive thing from each day can help to mentally prepared you for the next, to remind you of why you're here, doing what you do.

Karen King ([20:01](#)):

And then something else that you can do, is to create an end of day ritual. That helps to transition from your work day to home or to wherever it is you may be staying in your downtime. It might be listening to music in the car. It might be a simple mantra of saying to yourself out loud as you get in the car, "Done, done, done." Maybe you wanna reflect on the day for a few minutes, so you sit in the car and breathe and process that. But when you turn the ignition, you're moving on. Now, you're back into your own time, your own life.

Karen King ([20:42](#)):

So be looking for those kinds of things. Some healthcare workers take a- take a shower and change into their own clothes before they leave. Um, others shed their clothes in their garage or right at their front door in a marked off space, um, in an effort to protect your family and to be not carrying the virus should it be on you into the house or wherever it is that you're going.

Karen King ([21:07](#)):

And you can process that in your mind as something of an emotional shedding of your workday. You're letting it go. So try to use some of these vis- ah, rituals or something that you have used in the past that works for you, just in an effort to compartmentalize your work life from your own life, outside of work.

Karen King ([21:32](#)):

It is important during these times to stay connected, in- in large part, you know, yes, we wanna know what's going on, but also in an effort to maintain support. You may be asked to or want to limit your contact with other people, ah, because of the fears of your work putting you at higher risk of spreading the virus to others. And while that's sensible and a reflection on the selfless concern that you brought, you know, into your helping profession, it's also important and may be more important than ever to stay socially connected with something of a support system to help you navigate these challenges that you're facing.

Karen King ([22:19](#)):

So you wanna find creative ways to maintain regular contact, be it with family or friends, um, other loved ones, care- you know, people that you care for, maybe even at a distance. If you're in quarantine or temporarily separated from the people that normally you interact with and care for, um, or if you're physically distancing, use technology to maintain regular contact with others. You can use group messaging, ah, phone calls and video chats, FaceTime, sending photos and little videos. Um, those are just some of the ways that you can connect now. You can hold social gatherings and family meetings on any number of programs in technology today that allow you to do that.

Karen King ([23:08](#)):

You wanna turn your work relationships, ah, into support relationships as well. You're with these people for long days. Check in on each other. Allow time to express your feelings, you know, or problem solve tough case challenges, um, with one another. If you see somebody do something really well, give them a compliment. It will make them feel better, and it will make you feel better too. And those positive reinforcements may not be coming from anywhere else at this point. So they can really be important to the people that you are standing next to all day long.

Karen King ([23:49](#)):

You can form a peer support group, or implement a buddy system, where you have another person to keep an eye on, and they keep an eye on you. And then you can check in with each other. And you can use social medial also to find additional support. Tap into the vast community of other healthcare works who are also in the same fight just like you. Get ideas on what's working for them at their workplace, ways that they're using to de-stress, or even just an encouraging post to provide a positive boost to your day. Those things are out there and available to you, so take advantage of them.

Karen King ([24:30](#)):

You want to be aware of, ah, the potential signs for s- of stigma, because this is going on and I alluded to it a little earlier. Unfortunately, you may encounter this due to the fears that you've been exposed to the virus. And as we learn more about the disease, it's understandable for you and for others to be fearful, but it can present a challenge in staying connected with family and friends.

Karen King ([24:57](#)):

So, you know, remember the digital methods of communication that we're mentioning here, um, and combat the stigma by educating others on- on what we do know, and the protective measures that we can put in place to keep ourselves, our families, our communities and the workplace as safe as possible. And, you do that for yourself, as well as you're doing it for others.

Karen King ([25:26](#)):

The bottom line is that you need to prioritize your own health. We've covered some strategies to protect yourself mentally and emotionally during these challenging times, but you can't forget your physical health either. You wanna do your best to get adequate rest so that you can recharge during your breaks in between shifts. You know, deep restful sleep clears stress hormones. It repairs the impact of stress, helps to reset your body and your brain. Also, boosts your immune system. So, prioritize your rest between shifts, so that you can recharge your batteries and feel energized and safer and in more control when you do return to work.

Karen King ([26:12](#)):

Find time to eat and stay hydrated. It's so important. Try for regular meals, or grab them at intervals when you can. Healthy snacks, have them handy. Bring them with you. They'll help you, again, to re-boost your energy, and give your body the vitamins and nutrients that it needs to keep going. You know, you wanna try to avoid coping with alcohol and drugs or even junk food, um, because they can create more problems, not just in the short term, emotionally, physically, financially, even in the long run.

Karen King ([26:50](#)):

And, last, find easy ways to fit exercise into your day. Exercise may be the last thing on your mind after being on your feet for a long shift, but physical activity actually does help us to calm our stress response, reducing stress hormones, and boosting endorphins to help lift the mood. You may not have time for a full workout, but there are simple ways to get moving. Just do some stretch- stretches. Go for a quick walk around the block, or run up a flight of stairs.

Karen King ([27:22](#)):

Again, turn to technology. There are so many free programs that have been available, um, regardless of what type of exercise you prefer, whether it's a little dance routine, a breathing exercise, yoga or something more strenuous. Those things are available, via computer or on your phone. So put those to use.

Karen King ([27:44](#)):

Um, use techniques like progressive relaxation and deep breathing exercises. These are easy techniques that you can use on a regular basis even throughout the day. It's, kind of, an in the moment way, to help you combat both acute and chronic stress. You have, again, um, a handout that's associated with the program that reads, "Techniques for Relaxing Mind and Body." And, you know, I'll remind you that your breath is always with you, and just three deep, slow breaths can bring calm to you in a very short period of time.

Karen King ([28:26](#)):

It's important to do a regular check-in with yourself. You wanna be able to monitor, "How am I doing?" Know the signs of depression, extreme stress and burnout, you know, things like difficulty sleeping, can't get to sleep, keep waking up in the night, waking up feeling unrefreshed, chronic exhaustion, might be intrusive thoughts or memories and feelings of hopelessness, or a lack of feelings. Your aspect just becomes flat. You're pushing through the days with, you know, something of a sense of indifference. You're just doing what's necessary.

Karen King ([29:03](#)):

So be aware that, you know, this experience can also trigger grief. And there's a handout that reads, "Understanding Grief for Helping Professionals," and that may be very helpful. So, again, I urge you take a look at those accompanying handouts that are available to you. If you're concerned about what you're experiencing, talk to a peer or a supervisor, or even seek professional help at this time.

Karen King ([29:32](#)):

And remember, it's not a sign of weakness or an inability to do your job if you're struggling. This is an extraordinary situation and it requires extraordinary sacrifice and dedication from you. So recognize

when you need help, and reach out for it. It will help sustain your strength as you can continue to work through this crisis.

Karen King ([29:56](#)):

And then finally, be kind to yourself. In these challenging times, nothing is a given. Life as we know it, is morphing and changing daily. It's easy to talk about strategies and sometimes very difficult to put them into play. You know, I want to encourage you to do the best that you can. Do your best to give yourself the same care and kindness that you give to your patients and those you love.

Karen King ([30:24](#)):

Recognize that feelings of stress and- and other sometimes intense emotions are a normal reaction to this abnormal situation. Honor those feelings. Allow yourself to have them, but also strive to find moves and strategies that help to address them, and afford you some balance going through these unprecedented, unpredictable times.

Karen King ([30:51](#)):

It isn't going to be like this forever. But, it's going to be vital to support our mental and emotional health as we continue to find our way through it. There's a self care checklist handout also associated with the program that you'll see. And it has good reminders of things to keep in mind.

Karen King ([31:14](#)):

And finally, I want to close with a thank you. Thank you to all of you for all that you do every day, for your courage, your energy, your perseverance and kindness. We are grateful. I am personally grateful. Your community is grateful, as are your family and friends. Please take care of yourself, so that we can continue to be thankful for you and your well-being. And, I'll end with that, and send it back to Megan.

Megan ([31:48](#)):

Thank you Karen. And ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for being with us today. That concludes today's webinar.