

TEN TIPS ON HOW TO SUPPORT PROTECTIVE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS (PPR) DURING COVID19

Context: We're now months into the global pandemic COVID19, which has disproportionately affected healthcare providers (HCPs), and in particular, those who work on the front lines – emergency responders, emergency departments, general hospitals, long term care facilities, shelters, correctional facilities. Numbers of diagnosed patients, ED visits and admissions to hospital are high, and while the numbers are – thankfully – proving less than worst case scenarios, the combination of unusually busy and stressful workloads after weeks of experiencing high level anticipatory stress, together with ongoing lack of clarity about the safety of our plans for PPE, testing protocols, availability of treatments, and HCP mobility and redeployment strategies, have in some cases contributed to a fraying of our professional relationships.

And while **Protective Professional Relationships** (PPR) are secondary to PPE in terms of ensuring our colleagues' safety, it is a close second – we know from the patient safety literature that psychological safety, like physical safety, saves lives. Being aware of how we impact our workplaces, influence our relationships with colleagues, and care for our own health and wellbeing are all important factors.

What can each one of us do to support **Protect Professional Relationships** (PPR) and psychologically safe environments during COVID19? Here are ten important strategies:

- 1) **Safety First:** Acknowledge the primacy of good screening and PPE for everyone's wellbeing; do everything you can to advocate for what you and your team needs, keeping in mind leadership is doing the best it can in difficult circumstances. Conserve PPE within safe limits.
- 2) **Attend to Basic Needs:** Address your own and contribute to colleagues' meeting their basic needs – housing, nutrition, hydration, sleep, exercise - to the best of your ability.
- 3) **Justice:** Draw on the expertise of the provincial Bioethics Table, coordinated by the University's Joint Centre for Bioethics, to inform challenging clinical decisions you and your team may face. (<http://jcb.utoronto.ca/news/covid-19.shtml>)
- 4) **Presence:** Be present with colleagues, even if only virtually is permitted. Set up virtual drop in opportunities for yourself and colleagues to support one another and hear how everyone is doing.
- 5) **Educate** yourself on what works and what doesn't to support the psychological health of colleagues: e.g. avoid critical stress debriefing approaches which heighten rather than calm emotions, in favour of psychological first aid.



(<https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/psychological-first-aid/>) Focus on team reflection, meaning, cohesion, hope.

- 6) **Validate:** Take the time to slow down and to listen actively– the goal is to decrease reactivity in professional relationships at a time when we are all more likely to be hypervigilant, emotionally and physically exhausted, and irritable. Validate your colleagues' experiences.
- 7) **Be Kind:** *Be Kind Whenever Possible. It is always possible (Dalai Lama XIV).* In times of extreme stress, we are all at greater risk of irritability and impatience with colleagues. Take the time to be kind - some examples might be...asking a learner or colleague how they are coping and actually pausing to listen to their answer; reassuring someone who has forgotten to do an important task that we understand it is a tough time and we're all finding it harder to focus. Kindness helps us all; we are all stronger together.
- 8) **Resilience:** Focus on personal and organizational resilience by participating in relevant training offered by your institution – problem solving, upskilling, simulation, support for teamwork.
- 9) **Avoid reactive judgement:** Be aware of quick judgments about others' behaviour. For example, try to think ill/stressed/traumatized before evil when colleagues seem to be reactive themselves or not performing at their usual capacity. Check in with them about how they are doing and encourage them to seek help if needed. Educate yourself re available mental health resources within your institution so that you can refer to these.
- 10) **Self-Compassion:** Your wellbeing and endurance are essential to your own and your colleague's capacity to weather COVID19 with less rather than more stress and fear. Taking time for your own wellness – exercise, downtime, relationships, sleep, nutrition, fun – will contribute not only to your resilience but also to your capacity to enact the above contributors to **Protective Professional Relationships**.

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