

### ▶ **SARS and health care workers: Dealing with stress**

The sudden emergence of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is a particularly upsetting situation for health care workers. The spread of the disease, the unknown cause and the precautions being taken to protect the health of the public, patients and professionals can be scary and disrupting.

#### **The extent of the danger**

There is no question that the danger is real but it is important to keep the extent of the danger in context. If you have not been in close contact with someone with SARS or suspected of having SARS (i.e., cared for, lived with, or had face-to-face contact [within 1 metre] with, or had direct contact with respiratory secretions and/or body fluids), you should not be concerned, and there are generally no special precautions you need to take. Transmission appears to be through droplet spread or contact with infected surfaces. At this time, there has been no evidence of community transmission in Canada.

Following prudent, good hygiene practices is always recommended to reduce your risk of catching an infection. If you are working in a health care facility, it is important to follow infection control precautions. For the most up-to-date information in your community, contact the local public health authority.

#### **Anxiety and SARS**

People naturally become concerned when their health is threatened. This is as true of health workers as anyone else. Being a professional does not make you immune and anxiety can be worse when the exact causes of the threat are unknown. It is extremely important to understand that this is a normal reaction. Often people become afraid of feeling anxious, and this makes matters worse.

The extra work required by SARS protocols is a significant disruption in the workplace. The usual familiar and stabilizing routines of your workday are missing. As services are shut down, you may be worried about a loss of income. You may be concerned about the impact a cancellation of services will have on patients and the work schedule once the SARS situation settles. The longer SARS is a problem, the bigger the problem for the health care system.

People may feel more anxious about SARS because of their feelings about the war in Iraq. One situation can make the other one more difficult to handle. This is not unusual.

People who have recently experienced a sad or traumatic

event (e.g., car accident, loss of a loved one, loss of a job, serious health problem) may find SARS more upsetting. It is normal to feel more stressed under these conditions. You may find yourself revisiting feeling and thoughts about the other event.

#### **What to watch for**

You will probably know you are becoming too upset if you feel that you are, but you may need to be a little more observant of how stress affects us. As health care professionals, we can often tune out our own reaction too well.

If you change your daily or professional routine more than you need to, it may indicate you need to stop and check whether you are coping adequately. Other things to be aware of are:

- over-vigilance regarding the media and SARS
- daily preoccupation with SARS
- sleep disruption
- fatigue
- disturbance of daily eating (over- or under-eating)
- avoidance of others or certain patients
- feeling anxious or depressed
- feeling panic or having panic attacks
- being easily startled
- crying
- drinking more alcohol
- taking more prescription drugs
- having little patience.

#### **What do I do?**

The first thing to do is to talk to someone you trust. This can be a colleague, family member, friend or clergy. Remember this is not like a periodic checkup where one time is sufficient. Don't be shy. Talk about your thoughts and feelings as often as you need to. Be honest. Getting it off your chest helps.

If you notice a colleague or co-worker's behaviour has changed, ask them how they are doing. Make time to talk. After you have talked, follow up to see how they are doing. It shows you care, and it can be a relief to both of you.

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Remember that we need to practice good psychological first aid on ourselves as well as our patients! Eat well, take time to rest and relax. Uncertainty and rumour increase our anxiety and fear, so keep up-to-date with the latest information available. Enjoy the friends, colleagues and family that you care about. Laughter can truly be the best medicine for stress!

If, however, you or someone you know is really struggling with symptoms over a period of time, such as a week or two, a visit to a regulated health professional should be considered. This is also true if you just can't cope. Unfortunately, professionals all too often avoid consulting other professionals for a variety of reasons. This is not wise.

### SARS and your kids

SARS can be upsetting to children and teenagers as well. It is important to discuss these issues with them. Don't be afraid to bring up the subject. And you may need to discuss it more than once.

It is important to tell them the truth, to reassure them and to let them know that they can count on you and the adults around them. Often giving them a hug, along with the words, will help reassure them. It can also be good therapy for you.

If you notice the behaviour of your children or teenagers changes significantly at home or at school, discuss the situation with them. If it's related to being afraid of SARS or other situations, such as the war in Iraq, try to help them as suggested. If this does not work over a period of a week or two, you may want to consider consulting a regulated health professional.

Some of the behavioural changes might include:

- sleeping too much or too little
- being tired all the time
- staying in their room
- avoiding others
- talking less
- feeling cranky and irritable
- more arguments and fights with others
- behaviour problems at home, at school or in the community
- eating a lot more or less
- feeling sad or anxious
- declining grades.

This advice is very effective for your spouse or significant other as well. Talking often can help you both.

### Who can help?

- Consult expert sources such as infectious disease colleagues, the public health hotlines or the government Web sites and follow their advice.
- Don't be shy. Talk to people you care about and trust.
- See a regulated health professional if symptoms persist or they are too strong for you to handle. These professionals include your family physician, nurses, psychologists and social workers.

### For more information

See *Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts* at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/emergency-urgence](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/emergency-urgence)

Visit the SARS Update on [cma.ca](http://cma.ca) for CMA shortcuts to the most current information on SARS from Health Canada and other expert sources.

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