



**Helping you and your patients keep emotional balance
in this unbalancing time**

**1) Acknowledge that increased anxiety and fear are a normal response.
Respond with opportunities to express the emotion in a healthy way.**

It is normal to experience anxiety and fear in the current situation where so much is unknown and so much is out of our control. Dialysis patients may have heightened concern about their own mortality, which is not irrational. Dialysis patients are at increased risk from COVID-19 because their immune systems are compromised due to their kidney failure. The first US patient to die from COVID-19 was on dialysis, and patients may have heard this in the news.

DO:

- Use empathic statements that accept the negative emotion: “Sounds like you have been fearful about what might happen to you and your family. There is a lot that is unknown right now and everything is changing very fast.”
- Invite patients to share their concerns: “I’d like to hear what’s on your mind about this. Sometimes people don’t like to admit they are upset and it shuts them down. Sometimes it helps just to share with another person.”
- Adapt the “Magic Questions” to help open a conversation (see table 1 below).
- Check in: “I’ve heard some others express that this coronavirus really scares them. I want to check in and see how you are doing in response.”
- Remind patients of their resilience and successful coping strategies: “What has helped you get through difficult times before?”

Table 1. Magic Questions script for eliciting life-long values during Advance Care Planning

“It helps me to be a better doctor/nurse/social worker for you when I know about you as a person.”

- 1) Tell me about yourself (your loved one).
- 2) What makes you (or your loved one) happy these days?
- 3) What worries you (or your loved one) for the future?'

Source: Dinescu A. Advance Care Planning. In Korc-Grodzicki, B., & Tew, W. P. (2017). *Handbook of geriatric oncology: Practical guide to caring for the older cancer patient*. Demos Medical.

DON'T:

- Do not wave away difficult emotions. Suppressing emotions tends to make them stronger. Instead, allow expression of the emotion – either verbally by talking about it or through cathartic outlets such as music, poetry, movies. This helps dissipate the energy of the emotion.
- Do not give false reassurance. Don't say things such as "nothing is going to happen to you" which is something you can't promise. This is a fine line, because it IS appropriate to say things like, "All of us are working hard to keep all of our patients and our staff healthy. You can help by...(whatever the new procedures are, such as sitting far apart in the waiting room.)"

2) Recognize that the dialysis center may be an important source of stability and routine for many patients.

Especially for patients living in households that now have children or grandchildren staying home from school, adults tele-commuting to their jobs, or wage earners whose jobs have dried up, home may be a place where normal routines have been upended. Most people are comforted by the routine and the familiar, so the regularity of coming to dialysis, seeing familiar staff and patients, may be very important source of stability. Some suggestions to implement, if they are consistent with infection control procedures:

- Do your best to stick to the schedule and maintain as much normalcy as possible.
- Let patients use their own chairs if possible.
- Prepare patients for the fact that some things aren't going to be normal. Say, "Everyone does better when they know what to expect. There is a lot changing all around us, so some routines might be disrupted. We are going to do all that we can to provide a sense of routine. We will also try to openly communicate with you if things need to change."

3) Honor the memory of any patients who die

Our first instinct might be to downplay attention to any patients who might die during this pandemic, on the theory that we don't want to frighten patients and give even more attention to mortality. The reality is, people are already aware of the heightened risk of death. If a person that has been sitting in the next station over on the same shift for the past three years is suddenly absent, the patients around them are going to wonder what happened, even if they don't ask.

One of the major fears that many people have about dying is that they will be forgotten, that it will be as though even the memory of their life is erased. Therefore, memorials and respectful remembrances of patients who have died can be a source of comfort. Open acknowledgement of another patient's death gives the message that we will remember you and cherish your memory even after your death.

Some practices that other health care providers have used:

- Place a rose on the chair or bed of a patient who has died and leave it unoccupied for a period. (May not be practical in facilities at capacity.)
- Make an in memorium bulletin board with notices of the person's obituary, notes from staff about what they enjoyed about the person, possibly from family members. (Need to be careful about privacy and have permission to post.)
- Display a ritual memory object, such as a wreath that staff ties a ribbon on for each person who has died, or a small fountain where a beautiful stone is placed for each person who has died. A small ritual to add the person to the object can help provide a bit of closure for staff as well as patients.
- Send a bereavement card to family from the dialysis center staff.

4) Self care when there is no time or energy for self care

You are busy taking care of your family, your colleagues, your patients. How possibly to find a moment for yourself? Here are three effective strategies that do not take extra time:

- Take a breath. For one full breath, in and out, just rest in the amazing capacity of your breath to keep you alive!
- Stop and smell the roses. Rest your eyes on something of beauty – a flower, a patch of sky, a piece of art.
- Smile. Turning the corners of your mouth up – even when you don't quite feel it – can create a relaxation response in you – and in those around you. Smiles create a good kind of contagion. Laughing is also great medicine.

See this excellent summary of evidence-based tips for resilience:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/anxiety-coronavirus-mental-wellness-tips/2020/03/16/f187faf2-67b8-11ea-9923-57073adce27c_story.html