

## **Surviving the Pandemic as a Primary Care Provider**

*By Joe Sherman, MD*

As primary care providers, we have been supporting our patients through all the stressors of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Some of them have had COVID-19 infection or are in fear of contracting it. Many with chronic illnesses are not showing up for follow-up visits either in-person or through telehealth. Some are suffering economically because of unemployment or salary cuts. Everyone is under immense stress with all the physical and psychological manifestations that it brings. We often take on our patients' suffering while we ourselves are under the same stress that they are.

The only way for us to handle our own stress while being attentive to our patients' issues is to have some pandemic survival skills. As I write this, I almost feel like I am betraying my own mantra of "we did not become physicians to merely survive in our practices, but to thrive in our practices." However, during this pandemic, I believe we are called on to survive until we have enough breathing space to explore how we can truly thrive.

So, here are my 5 suggestions of how to survive the Pandemic as primary care providers. I am not including "self-care" in this list because I assume you have all heard enough about that subject. These suggestions are more direct and pragmatic.

### **1. Communicate, communicate, communicate.**

This principle can be applied across the board from parents talking to their kids to healthcare leaders talking to their employees. There is no substitute for transparent and open communication. Even when we aren't sure of what we are doing or don't even have a plan, we are at our best when we communicate clearly to others and listen carefully to what they have to say. Many of us are going through the experience of wondering what school will look like for our kids this fall. With 3 kids in 3 different schools, I have much more confidence in the school which communicates a clear plan than I am with the ones which keep me in the dark. I also feel so much more comfortable when people clearly communicate their comfort level with physical distancing decisions in social situations rather than assuming I feel the same way they do.

### **2. Expose yourself to information and news when you are best able to digest it.**

We are constantly barraged with medical, political, and social information about the pandemic whether we are prepared for it or not. If we only take on this information when we are best able to handle it, we can avoid the constant vigilance which comes with continuous exposure. This is not always possible, but we actually have more control over this than we think. For me, that means taking in the news and reading medical updates on COVID only in the morning after I have spent some time in meditation. After 5 or 6 PM, I try to shut it all down and just do what needs to be done, placing a priority on connecting with my family and getting to sleep.

### **3. Be deliberate about connecting with life-giving friends and family.**

While we all work hard and need some down time, we are also becoming increasingly isolated during the pandemic. When we do have some free time, we can refuel our emotional tanks through connection with life-giving friends and family rather than obligatory social engagements (virtual or in-person). This takes a little thinking and planning. Who is the person who always makes you feel better after a conversation? What friend always seems to know the right thing to say when you express your emotions? That is the person or persons we need to connect with on a regular basis. It may be a walk, phone call, or FaceTime chat. It doesn't have to be a long encounter, but it needs to be meaningful and "to the point." I have been calling old friends from med school or residency who have been through rough times with me to boost my spirits. Most of the time, I am able to reciprocate. What a bonus!

#### **4. Decrease or reframe expectations.**

At the end of each day, I try to connect with my wife to review our experiences and check in on how we are feeling. I can't tell you how many times I keep score to see if I accomplished as much as she had that day. Usually, I lose in this comparison. Then, she reflects back to me what she heard me say. It usually goes something like this, "So, you did the grocery shopping, took the dog to the vet, helped our son search for a used car, cooked dinner, and facilitated a physician support session. What more did you think you should have gotten done?" We are always hardest on ourselves and think we come up short of what we "should" get done. Chronic stress wears us out and lowers our capacity to meet our own expectations. We need to give ourselves a break and aim for 70-80% of our usual high expectations and reframe what we consider to be an accomplishment.

#### **5. Let go of "having it all together."**

Every now and then, I need to let go of my illusion that I'm doing well through all of this. I have to admit that I am uncertain, afraid, and often overwhelmed. If I can admit this to myself and accept it, I might have a chance to admit it to someone else and help them feel like they aren't alone in these feelings. It's like the poet Leonard Cohen said, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

So, let's all try to survive this crazy COVID time together and, when we can finally come up for air, we can reflect back on what really matters to us and how we can truly thrive in our medical careers!