Promoting Health, Self-Care, and Resiliency for NC Public Health Staff

During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

NCPH

North Carolina
Public Health

Contents

Foreword

The pandemic's effect on short and long-term physical health, tragic deaths, and deep economic impacts have been front and center. But the impact on our social and emotional health is more insidious, may be overlooked, and may be long-lasting. The unrelenting demands, urgency, worry, uncertainty, personal loss and grief, and controversy that has been a part of the response to this pandemic can create an environment of toxic stress and trauma for our public health workforce. The physiological response to that unrelenting stress (e.g., constant high levels of the stress hormone cortisol) can have lasting effects on our biology. Recognizing the reality of the stress and taking steps to lower it and build resiliency is crucial for the effectiveness of our response now and for the sustainability of our workforce in the future.

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Preface

During COVID- 19, everyone recognizes that the work of protecting the public's health can be overwhelming. We repeatedly hear that we are in an unprecedented time, that everything is new and changing. But we know that public health is strong and adept in tackling whatever challenges come our way. No doubt, we can tackle this one as well.

The toll these extraordinary times are taking on our public health workforce is substantial. Our welfare is more important now than ever. We must not overlook our wellbeing.

To maintain a healthy work environment, promote good mental health, prevent the long-lasting effects of adverse events, and support our public health workforce, NC public health leadership must promote our staff's health and wellbeing. We must be committed to preventing toxic stress from having an unpredictable impact.
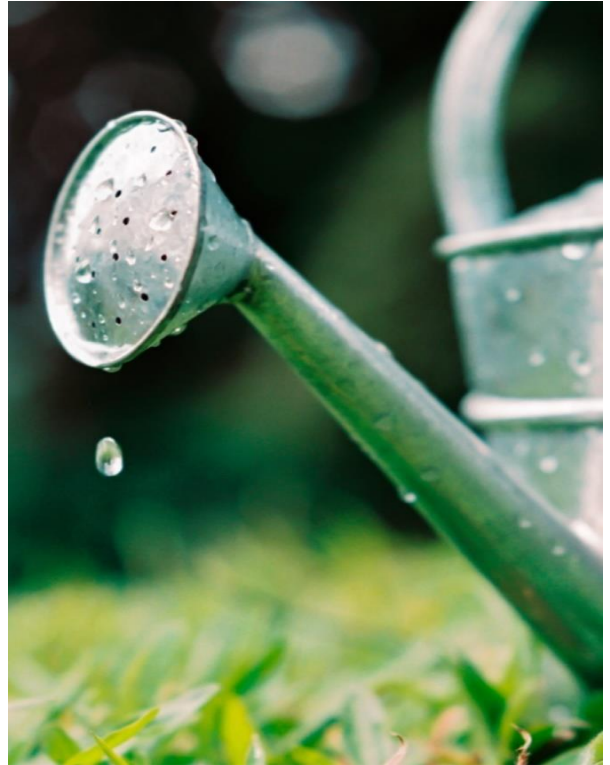
Introduction

We have organized this document is into six sections, including a section addressing Foundational Principles and five Key Areas to focus on: Creating a Resilient Organization, The Importance of Self-Care, Helping the Individual Increase Resiliency, Shining the Spotlight, and Motivating Employees through Recognition. Each Key Area includes an *Easy Win* section that provides one or more actions that can be implemented quickly with minimal cost or time investment. For leaders who wish for a more in-depth exploration of actions to foster an improved environment for their public health staff, we have included a *Take a Deeper Dive* section for each Key Area.

Purpose

The guidance and resources found in this document will assist NC public health agency leadership in developing plans to foster a resilient public health workforce and work environment.

Foundational Principles

Human Flourishing The 2019 APHA Public Health Code of Ethics declares human flourishing as one of its values: *Health and safety are essential conditions for human flourishing. Public health practitioners and organizations have an ethical responsibility to prevent, minimize, and mitigate health harms and to promote and protect public safety, health, and wellbeing* (p. 5, https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/membergroups/ethics/code_of_ethics.ashx?la=en&hash=3D6643946AE1DF9EF05334E7DF6AF89471FA14EC). This obligation must be directed toward the populations we serve, but also toward ourselves: the workforce that carries out the essential public health services.

Public Interest and Public Trust *When health care professionals report for duty during a public health emergency… they must leave their home and family, perhaps during a frightening and difficult time. Public health and safety professionals are expected to take risks and to put themselves in harm's way as a professional ethical obligation. Also, they are expected to put the public interest and the public trust ahead of their personal interests* (APHA, p. 2).

Self-Care as an Ethical Duty The duties of public health nurses and other staff to care for others and themselves are both ethical obligations, especially during a pandemic when usual home and work routines are disrupted.

The American Nurses Association Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements offers wise guidance that is applicable to all public health staff. *The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption and destabilization. The Nurses Code of Ethics remains our unshakable foundation, providing invaluable guidance in this proverbial storm. Nurses can and should draw on Provision 5 when questions about our duty to care and duty to ourselves arise, and to tap into advocacy for the ethical practice of self-care at this time (*[https://www.nursingworld.org/~4a1fea/globalassets/covid19/provision-5_-self-care--covid19-final.pdf,](https://www.nursingworld.org/~4a1fea/globalassets/covid19/provision-5_-self-care--covid19-final.pdf) *p.1)*

The nurse owes the same duties to self and to others, including the responsibility to promote health and safety, preserve wholeness of character and integrity, maintain competence and continue personal and professional growth (Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements; Provision 5, p. 18).

Commitment to Change Allow the ideas in this document to spark creativity and commitment to change. Share it widely and let collective impact drive change forward.

Key Area 1: Creating A Resilient Organization

Having a resilient organization helps retain staff that can cope during periods of crisis. It helps staff and the organizations withstand disruptions when they occur. A resilient environment is essential in protecting the organization's mental health and for the organization's resiliency before, during, and after a crisis. A resilient organization contributes to reducing mental trauma. It also increases the prospect that the workforce will cope and thrive during the crisis. Resilience is essential to every organization. Any organization is vulnerable and may lack resources to build resiliency.

Easy Win

Subscribe to CMSWire to get email information regularly regarding improving organization resilience. Here is an article that shares ways to promote resiliency, including solidifying the organizations' vision and creating a culture of optimism https://www.cmswire.com/leadership/how-to-improve-organizational-resilience/

Take a Deeper Dive

- The *Resilience in a Box* workbook can help guide the agency with resources and tools to increase their flexibility and ability to manage during a crisis. https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/resilience-box/resilience-101-workbook-resources

- Need a roadmap to create a resilient organization? The American Medical Association provides steps to create a resilient organization before, during, and after a crisis to reduce trauma and increase the likelihood that the workforce will cope or even thrive. https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2020-05/caring-for-health-care-workers-covid-19.pdf

Key Area 2: The Importance of Self Care

It is hard to care for the community when we are worried about childcare, not sleeping well, working crazy hours, and not caring for ourselves very well. We must remember to put our oxygen masks on first. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs reminds us that we must take care of our personal needs before we can be useful in taking care of others.

Easy Win

Supporting COVID-19 efforts is a struggle for everyone in public health. Pivoting to respond to the quick changes in demand and disruptions can be stressful, and the continuing stress for months on end can lead to diminished mental and physical health. The sense of urgency of every request or need for action makes it difficult to relax and provide attention to yourself.

It is vital to take time to relax, destress, and connect with others to remain effective. Reminding staff of simple self-care tools can help individuals be more effective in the COVID-19 response.

- Take care of your health by getting adequate sleep, exercise, and maintaining good nutrition
- Take breaks from work and media coverage to recharge and refocus
- Watch out for Substitutions: Food, alcohol, and actions that keep you from dealing with stressors head-on.
- Stay connected. Reach out to friends, family, and colleagues for social support
- Stay grounded. Practice mindfulness through meditation, yoga, or exercise
- Many online tools can offer guidance
- Talk to someone about your feelings. Seek therapeutic support when necessary, especially when experiencing feelings of chronic stress, apathy, anxiety, anger, depression, or helplessness

Take a Deeper Dive

Consider having a team meeting (in person with social distancing or via video conferencing) to discuss some or all of the following resources. Listening to each other as they discuss an article or resource can help make the concepts "stickier" and allow team members to learn from each other by hearing how different staff interpret the new knowledge.

- **Association of State and Territory Health Officials** The Association offers a guide for practicing self-care during Covid-19 specific for public health professionals. The guide provides self-care resources and tools for use in the public health setting and includes a pocket guide. The techniques include resources that are easy to use for the public health staff, including taking a 5-minute walk with your staff, offering healthy snacks during a busy day, and focusing on what you did well. https://www.astho.org/COVID-19/Practicing-Self-Care/

- **Health Leads USA** Health Leads is a social needs intervention company offering resources for supporting the health care workforce that can be implemented with public health staff, including reflection logs and tips for reducing anxiety. https://healthleadsusa.org/resources/self-care-resources-during-covid-19/

- **American Psychological Association Services (a subsidiary of the APA)** APA Services offers this article about self-care advice for health care professionals during COVID-19. https://www.apaservices.org/practice/ce/self-care/health-providers-covid-19

- **COVID-19 Pandemic Response Resources** The Center for Study of Traumatic Stress has compiled fact sheets and other resources to support the health and wellbeing of communities (healthcare workers, families, leaders, etc.) impacted by COVID-19. No permission is needed to use or adapt these fact sheets for you or your organization. These fact sheets are in the public domain, and you may use them freely .https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response

- *Hope4Healers* **Helpline**; provides mental health and resilience support for health care professionals and staff who work in health care settings and their families and is offered free in partnership with the NC Psychological Foundation. *(919) 226-2002* https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/mental-health-developmental-disabilities-and-substance-abuse/hope4nc-and-hope4healers

- **NC DHHS** offers tips for managing overall health during COVID-19, including tips for managing chronic disease. https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/about-covid-19/managing-overall-health

- **NCDHHS** also offers wellness resources that can be used to access needed to assist the individual in getting needed help. This resource and hotline list can be printed and posted in your agency. Tip: the bathroom wall is a great place to post such items, so they are seen! https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/about-covid-19/wellness-resources

- **North Carolina Nurses Association** offers self-care resources for nurses and health care staff and free offers for frontline staff. https://ncnurses.org/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-resources-for-nc-nurses/self-care-for-nurses-during-covid-19/

Key Area 3: Helping the Individual Increase Resiliency

Why do individuals need resilience? Individual resilience can be described as the ability to bounce

back. Think of a boxing match; when the opponent is knocked down, they are still in the fight if they are able to bounce back and resume the challenge. If they stay on the ground, the fight has been lost. When individuals are faced with adversity, stress, and trauma, the individual's resilience is what gives them the force to jump and resume the fight. Creating a workforce that can flex and bounce back helps the individual stay in the challenge and bounce back when the challenge is over.

Easy Win

American Holistic Nurses Association offers free resources for increasing resiliency, including a one-pager that provides instructions for centered breathing, guided imagery, and breathwork that can be posted in the agency and remind staff how to practice these techniques. Consider starting meeting with a few minutes focused on breathwork or centering.

https://www.ahna.org/Membership/Member-Advantage/Whatisself-care

Printable Signs and Pages

- Breathwork For Resilience
  https://www.ahna.org/Portals/66/Docs/Resources/Resilience/Breathwork%20for%20Resilience.pdf?ver=2020-04-17-155341-067

- Centering For Resilience
  https://www.ahna.org/Portals/66/Docs/Resources/Resilience/Centering%20for%20Resilience.pdf?ver=2020-06-30-142911-880

- Beach Guided Imagery for Resilience
  https://www.ahna.org/Portals/66/Docs/Resources/Resilience/Beach%20Guided%20Imagery%20for%20Resilience.pdf?ver=2020-04-28-130545-893

- Forest Guided Imagery for Resilience
  https://www.ahna.org/Portals/66/Docs/Resources/Resilience/Forest%20Guided%20Imagery%20for%20Resilience.pdf?ver=2020-05-04-154227-167

Take a Deeper Dive

- **Headspace**, a renowned mindfulness and meditation app offers all US healthcare professionals who have an NPI and work in public health settings free access to Headspace Plus through 2020. Subscriptions are redeemed using the individual provider NPI and email address. Nurses without an NPI can provide their organization information to verify their credentials. https://www.headspace.com/health-covid-19

- **Intermountain HealthCare** offers simple and quick ideas to increase resilience during the day. The tips include using time during handwashing as a mindfulness activity and using **STOP** when having anxiety or becoming overwhelmed.

  S- Stop what you are doing and just be still.
  T- Take a few deep breaths and just be aware you are breathing.
  O- Observe any sensations or emotions you may be feeling.
  P- Pause and come back to your breat. Proceed with a greater sense of calm.

  Intermountain also offers other free resources and suggestions for use in your agency to increase resilience in the public health workforce. https://intermountainhealthcare.org/blogs/topics/covid-19/2020/04/how-mindfulness-can-help-you-cope-during-covid-19/

- **The New Hanover County Resiliency Task Force** offers both local and state resources to assist health care providers, and individuals find access to resiliency support. https://www.nhcbouncesback.org/covid19

- T**he Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress** offers resources in multiple languages to support health care workers, individuals, organizations, families, and communities cope with traumatic stress https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response

Key Area 4: Shining the Spotlight

Shining the spotlight on employees' successes boosts morale and relieves stress. Focusing on individual nd organizational successes creates a culture of positivity and showcases your work in the

community. Show your community what you do by highlighting the agency's success, and the successes of individual employees. This will create a human side to your work and make your staff recognizable. In public health, we often are only highlighted in times of crisis or controversy, so creating a culture of showcasing success to your staff and community will result in a positive work culture and environment. Below are some ways you can shine the spotlight on all the great work public health does. It is time to toot our own horn!

Easy Win

Grabbing media attention: News outlets are generally not in the business of promoting your agency for free. Here is how to create interest in a story that will grab the attention of their audience:

https://www.satelliteindustries.com/assets/documents/making_impact/Media_Attention.pdf

Take a Deeper Dive

Infographics Infographics can be used to grab attention. They are tools that mix design, writing, and graphics to tell a story or convey a data message. In the age of rapid sharing of information, infographics can be used to get the message across in a visually compelling, easy to understand, and attention-grabbing manner. https://neilpatel.com/blog/12-infographic-tips/

Tips for creating infographics with your target audience in mind
1. Keep it simple
2. Keep it focused
3. Show things visually
4. Promote it
5. Make it easy to view
6. Make it a manageable length and size
7. Add white space

8. Create a killer headline
9. Focus on the flow
10. Check the facts and figures
11. Cite your sources

Email blasts can get information out to multiple ground at one time. It is essential that the email grabs the reader's attention immediately and conveys the message quickly and concisely.

10 Golden Rules for Creating an Email Blast.
1. Make sure you have a great list but not a big list
2. Commit to email marketing
3. Be consistent
4. Include a balance of texts and pictures
5. Create an "above the fold" call to action
6. Keep it short
7. Track it
8. Send yourself a test email every time
9. Do not spend too much time on the task
10. Always include your contact information in a prominent place
    https://thrivehive.com/10-golden-rules-for-email-blasts-2/

News Outlet Directories

- The Top 10 newspapers in NC by circulation https://www.agilitypr.com/resources/top-media-outlets/top-10-north-carolina-daily-newspapers-by-circulation/

- The NC Press Directory https://www.ncpress.com/directory/

- North Carolina News Outlets directory http://www.ncpolicywatch.com/community-resources/north-carolina-tv-stations/

Key Area 5: Motivating Employees Through Recognition
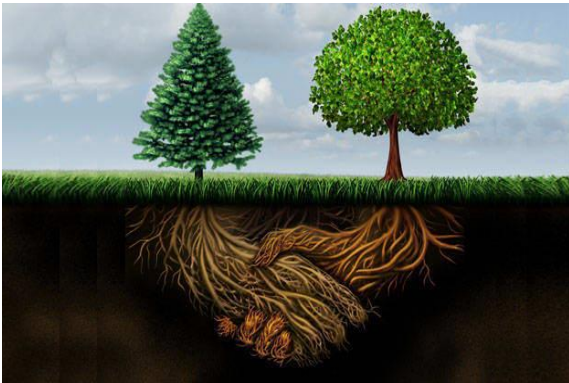
Recognizing employees is important for retention and job satisfaction. It lets the employee know you see their hard work, and it is valued. During the pandemic response, when everyone is so busy and distracted from their regular work, it is especially important to highlight employees who are going above and beyond while also carrying out their fundamental public health duties. Recognizing employees helps build morale and creates an environment of appreciation. Below are useful ideas and resources to recognize the incredible public health staff in your agency.

Easy Win

- Pick an employee a day to take a 10-minute walk with leadership to express their feelings in a safe and brave space.
- Have lunch with your employees or employee, show that you are all in this together, reach out to organizations and churches in your community to provide snacks or lunch.
- Have a Leader for the Day. Rotate responsibilities and give everyone a chance.
- Have a morning briefing to start the day on a positive note and then an afternoon debriefing to let everyone be heard.
- Play music to keep employees energized (make sure it is an appropriate playlist).
- Change the computer backgrounds to something peaceful and rotate them or use them to highlight successes and individuals.
- Start a recognition box. Have staff nominate individuals who are making a difference. Write a sentence or two about them and read them out to the staff at the end of each week.

Take a Deeper Dive

- "Morale Is The Capacity Of A Group Of People To Pull Together Persistently And Consistently In Pursuit Of A Common Purpose." Learn about 5 Innovative Ways to Boost Employee Morale. https://zenovate.com/innovative-ideas-to-boost-employee-morale/

- "Feeling seen makes an employee feel appreciated. And you know what they say - A person who feels appreciated will do MORE of what is expected than a person who does not feel appreciated." Create fun individual employee awards; https://www.thesashcompany.com/blog/5-fun-employee-awards-that-will-boost-morale

Afterword

The local public health workforce is incredibly dedicated and often comes to the field with a strong purpose and desire to contribute to a healthier community. In some ways, this more intense response to COVID-19 feels like the thing we have been preparing for in our training and experience throughout public health in North Carolina. Regardless, it is critical as this document outlines, to focus on organizational and individual resiliency; and too, it's important to acknowledge that some days are harder than others. Together, with a little extra grace and a lot of extra grit, we'll get through this heavy lift; and together, we'll be fine.

A song on the radio out this fall of 2020 is called "Doin' Fine" by Lauren Alaina from her album "Road less traveled." The chorus reminds me of the current work in local health departments:

> *I'm doing fine enough to know that everyone's a little broken*
> *Fine enough to learn that hearts are best when they're wide open*
> *I still got fear inside of me...I'm not okay but I'm gonna be alright.*
>
> *...I'm doing fine.*

Local health departments are still convening partners, seeing patients in most all our clinics, are working on deliverables of grants and programs that address our health priorities, and are continuing so many of the important things we were doing before COVID-19 drew us into its vortex. Confidence in the pandemic response and teamwork acuity increases weekly across the state. We now have extra surge capacity in a number of areas related to our communicable disease responsibilities. Still, these days of navigating this unpredictable world we are all experiencing can be exhausting.

The media, the political giants and the larger health care system may not always understand or validate our role, yet, eventually, we'll be able to tell our story of this public health pandemic response well enough to share the value of our contributions. In the meantime, we'll keep doing our best work each day. Lives are being saved and health is being preserved community by community. The local public health workforce keeps showing up and keeps doing hard things.

Among famous children's books like Charlotte's Web, American author EB White was also known for his *"letter to a man who had lost faith in humanity during a time of harrowing upheaval."* In that letter he says in response:

> *"... Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness. Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day."*

And I know our local public health workforce will be here tomorrow – helping community and helping each other.

– Lisa Macon Harrison, Granville Vance Public Health

<The End>