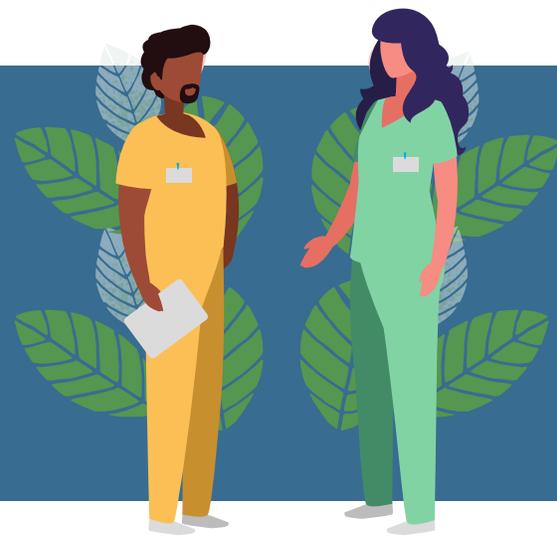


Self-Care for the Health Center Workforce

A Practical Guide for Leaders, Organizations, and Individuals

Prepared in partnership with Eileen Barrett, MD, MPH, FACP for
The Association of Clinicians for the Underserved



What is “Self-Care” and the purpose of this guide?

Self-care is critical to every person’s mental and physical health. It encompasses nearly any activity that helps a person manage or resolve stress, from both psychological and physiological points¹. Self-care looks different for everyone, but usually involves a combination of tools to reduce mental strain and fatigue, like making lists or scheduling break time, as well as physical stress relievers, such as exercise or breathing techniques. One of the most critical—but often overlooked—aspects of self-care is the need for organizations to take the lead in creating an environment that lessens stressors and is conducive to practicing these individual techniques. Employers and leaders can take many steps to reduce the stress-inducing aspects of their workplace environments as a whole, and to encourage self-care practices among individuals. Routine self-care, building a workplace that fosters resiliency and supports self-care practices, and properly addressing stressors that we all face is critical to building and maintaining a strong workforce. This guide lays out some tips for organizations, as well as for individuals, to help promote a healthy working environment and to properly manage stress that cannot be avoided.

¹ National Institute of Mental Health. “Caring for Your Mental Health.” April 2021. National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/caring-for-your-mental-health

Taking care of healthcare workers has never been more important. What can leadership do to help employees with their self-care?

People in healthcare often prioritize caring for others before themselves, so it is crucial their employers look out for them. Here are 10 steps your organization can take to show employees you care:



- **Adopt vaccine, booster, and masking rules**

- The science shows this is the best way to keep employees out of the hospital during the pandemic. When employees get vaccinated, they can avoid missed work, missed holidays, and expensive medical bills. Knowing your organization is doing what you can to keep them safe can also reduce their anxiety.

- **Improve ventilation in shared workspaces**

- Infection risk falls in well-ventilated areas. Installing high-quality air filters and having clean, pleasant, easily accessible employee break areas outside can keep everyone safer.

- **Adopt robust anti-discrimination and harassment policies**

- Support a safe working environment. Robust policies with transparent processes for reporting and responding to discrimination, harassment, and threats to safety help everyone.



- **Update employment/credentialing applications not to ask about mental health**

- Asking about mental health on applications is known to deter people from seeking mental health. It is better to ask “Do you currently have any condition that adversely affects your ability to practice medicine in a safe, competent, ethical, and professional manner?”

- **Reduce administrative burdens that are not mission critical**

- Suspend or eliminate administrative tasks that are not mission-critical, such as lengthy online mandatory trainings that do not clearly improve patient outcomes, unnecessary meetings, and inefficient workflows. Frontline staff will have great ideas for where to start.



- **Acknowledge feelings of grief and loss**

- Holding a patient memorial service either solely among staff or with the community can help people acknowledge their grief and draw strength from each other. Adding a moment of silence to team meetings can provide time for reflection and healing.

- **Share resources to support their mental health**

- Share local and national resources on mental health care, such as the National Mental Health Crisis Line (800-273-8255), the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255), as well as any local services. If you know someone who needs help, you will feel better having this information readily available.

- **Offer longer sick and bereavement leave**

- Many healthcare workers have been infected with COVID-19 or have lost loved ones, and quickly run out of leave. Extending leave options can foster loyalty and show you care.

- **Nurture a supportive work environment**

- Commit to thanking one frontline healthcare worker every day for something they have done to support the mission and values. Start an awards program that recognizes traits such as compassion, mentorship, and patient-centered care—not just for Quality Improvement (QI) and Relative Value Units (RVUs).



- **Nourish staff when appropriate**

- Supporting healthy food choices and providing diverse snack options can aid staff wellbeing.

Taking care of yourself has never been more important than it is today. What can employees do to practice their own self-care?

People in healthcare often prioritize caring for others before ourselves, but there is no reason not to do both. You and your personal health and wellbeing matter.

Sometimes we do not care for ourselves because we are short on time or we do not know where to start. Here are nine quick tips to start today that can help you care for yourself:

- **Get your vaccine and booster, and wear your mask**

- Protecting yourself and your loved ones from COVID can save you from missed work, missed holidays, and expensive medical bills. Knowing you are doing what you can to stay safe can also reduce anxiety.

- **Get your z-z-z**

- Sleep in a dark, cool room with a heavy blanket and an eye mask, and go to bed at the same time every night. Having trouble getting to sleep? Leave coloring pencils and a coloring book on your bedside, or a book that you love, so that you can pick them up instead of picking up your phone.



- **Stop doomscrolling**

- Spending hours on your phone reading about the pandemic or how hard everything is right now can make us anxious and depressed. If you are going to be scrolling, set a timer or use your phone's app settings so you do not spend more than 30 minutes a day.



- **Give yourself an energy boost when you are dragging**

- Stand and stretch your neck, arms, and back and you will feel a bit lighter. Also consider going up and down the stairs for 10 minutes, or doing 10 jumping jacks—a quick burst of exercise gives us energy.

- **Set boundaries and take breaks**

- Set and honor boundaries around when you will be available to work, respond to correspondence, and engage with your colleagues. Additionally, take breaks at regular and scheduled intervals.



- **Add something you love to do every day**

- No matter how busy you are, you have a few minutes to tend to a plant, read a few pages in a book, sing, listen to music, or go for a walk with a friend. Small gestures add up.

- **Acknowledge your feelings of grief and loss**

- Many of us are experiencing grief for patients, loved ones, or even for what our own life used to be like. Tending to your feelings by talking about them with a mental health provider, support group, or loved one can help. It can also help to have experiences that create reflection and healing, such as journaling, gardening, or creating artwork.

- **Be ready to help a friend with a mental health crisis**

- Add the National Mental Health Crisis Line (800-273-8255) and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255) to your phone, as well as any local crisis lines. If you know someone who needs help, you will feel better having this information readily available.

- **Nurture gratitude**

- Grateful people can more easily weather emotional ups and downs. Leave a journal next to your bed and every day write down three things you are grateful for - it does not matter if they are big or small, just that you do it every day. You may notice a change in how you feel in just two weeks.



This project is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$825,500 with 0 percentage financed with non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov)