# Self-Care and Stress Management During the COVID-19 Crisis:
## Toolkit for Oncology Health Care Professionals

Contributions from Mayo Clinic Cancer Center, Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center at UAB, Abramson Cancer Center at the University of Pennsylvania, Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center, and added thanks to consultant Rev. George Handzo

These are unprecedented times. There is no roadmap to help us in remembering and following frequently changing procedures and guidelines while we struggle to find balance between our own needs and the demands of the workplace.

Increased anxiety is common as we navigate COVID-19 and the broad impacts to our communities. It is a normal, natural response to have increased emotions during this time of uncertainty, including feeling stressed, worried, sad, scared, disappointed, and confused. The more we focus on what is out of our control, the more stressed and anxious we begin to feel.

Your well-being and emotional resilience are essential to our patients as we work to help our communities through the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are a few recommendations for stress management during this time.

**Self-care** is especially important under heightened stress. As stress increases, healthy lifestyle habits may fall by the wayside:

- Schedule and take brief breaks to care for your basic needs.
- Schedule and take brief relaxation breaks at work. A few minutes of a break during a shift can be calming. Even a 5-minute walk can improve energy and focus.
- Take time each day to do something that brings you joy, even if just for a brief moment.
- Maintain a healthy diet; bring your own meals to work.
- Keep your schedule of daily activities as regular as you can.
- Get some sunlight.
- Try chair yoga or stretching at work.
- Get regular exercise. Try walking or biking to work if you can.
- Avoid or limit use of alcohol and caffeine.
- Monitor yourself for excessive fatigue, irritability, poor focus, or anxiety.
- Pace yourself.
- Take a moment for a slow breath before entering a work area, entering a patient room, or clocking out. This can be difficult while wearing personal protective equipment like a mask, but breathing is calming and helps your body cope with physical symptoms of stress. If you regularly see a mental health professional, video visits or a phone call may be a good idea.
- If you do not regularly see a mental health professional but feel doing so could be helpful at this time, many mental health providers are offering free sessions for health care workers.
- If a spiritual practice is important to you or has been in the past, work it into your regular routine.

Manage the **cognitive impacts of stress**:

- Limit the intake of news; doing so can help manage difficult or upsetting feelings. The constant intake of frightening information can create more stress.
- Connect to reliable sources of information such as [www.cdc.gov](www.cdc.gov), [www.who.int](www.who.int), and [www.bjc.org/coronavirus](www.bjc.org/coronavirus). Consider checking them once or twice a day for 20 minutes each time.
- Focus on what is within your power. While we cannot control the COVID-19 virus, we can reduce our risk of infection. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer; try to maintain a 6-foot distance from someone who is coughing or sneezing to prevent the spread of germs; and prevent yourself from touching your face.
- Check in with anxiety-provoking statements and reframe them to be statements that better reflect the evidence. This can reduce stress and increase coping abilities. For example, reframe, "my family will get the virus and die" to "the majority of people who get the virus recover."

Create networks of **social support**. Social connections are important to our emotional well-being, especially in times of stress:

- Share your concerns and problem-solve with colleagues, family, and friends. Together, plan steps to manage difficulties.
- Lean on each other. You will be there when your coworkers need help, so count on them to be there for you.
- Find ways to connect virtually with friends and family, such as social media, phone, or FaceTime. Meaningful interactions with loved ones are important to our well-being.