

# Identifying Signs of Stress Among Senior Living or Long-Term Care Staff



## Senior Living

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“Global pandemic,” “COVID-19” and “mask” are all familiar terms that have become a part of our daily (and sometimes hourly) conversations with friends, family and colleagues. And, unfortunately, as COVID-19 cases increase and new restrictions are implemented in some areas, your staff may be feeling fear, stress, panic and anxiety.



If you or a member of your team are experiencing worsening mental health and/or substance use disorders, contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) national help line at **1.800.662.4357**.

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Developing a strategy to adequately address these feelings in the healthcare space can be daunting. Long-term care (LTC) nurses are managing the emotional wellbeing of residents along with their own personal troubles each day. Similarly, members of nursing facility staffs are under immense pressure, not to mention handling situations their profession has never experienced before.

**Here are some of the signs of stress your staff may experience:**

- **Fear and worry** about their own health and the health of their families is common, especially knowing they may be exposed and could bring this potentially deadly virus home.
- **Financial concerns** about possibly losing their jobs or experiencing a reduction in wages may be a concern. Additionally, they may even be feeling that they need to leave their jobs to protect themselves and their families.
- **Changes in physical stamina may occur** from dealing with the added physical demands of working longer hours and extra shifts. In addition, while wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) during their shifts is vital, it can be taxing on their bodies, uncomfortable and hot.
- **Changes in health conditions** can result from not being able to quiet their minds and get the much-needed rest their bodies need. The added stress of missing sleep can lead to acquired physical health conditions such as headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, memory and concentration issues, and heart disease.<sup>1</sup>
- **Worsening of mental health conditions** such as depression, anxiety and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can occur. Day-to-day stress coupled with concerns about physical health can worsen mental health issues.
- **Possible increase in use of tobacco and/or alcohol** to relieve stress is common. These substances may actually keep the body in a stressed state as opposed to reducing stress, and can lead to many negative health issues.

### Stress and staffing issues:

Stress in LTC facilities is continuing to build, and staffing concerns are at an all-time high. Facilities are experiencing a decrease in their workforce with no staffing pool to pull from and limited access to support from outside staffing agencies.

Before COVID-19, the industry was already experiencing issues with recruiting and a shortage of workers. The pandemic has only exacerbated the problem. The limited pool of workers can be a result of:

Candidates who are unavailable to work because they have contracted COVID-19 or are quarantined
Regulations issues and/or protocols for staff/residents
Employees who resign for fear of contracting COVID-19
Employee burnout from increased hours

The current staff may be working additional hours/shifts to keep the residents cared for, and this can lead to burnout. Burnout is a state of mental or physical exhaustion caused by an unmanageable workload.

### So how can management help retain the vital staff that keeps the facilities running smoothly?

- Provide staff an opportunity to take mental health breaks throughout their shifts, even if it is just five minutes to step away from work.
- Allow for safe, PPE-free zones that allow staff to remove their masks in a designated space, even in the parking lot.
- Be sure to exercise empathy. Empathy is defined as the social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts and needs of others, so that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support.<sup>2</sup>

### Ways of expressing empathy can include the following:

- Praise your staff for a job well done; don't look for the negatives.
- Listen to your staff. Sometimes they just need to be able to verbalize their feelings, and talking with them is helpful.
- Remember that your staff members are someone's special person: a parent, sibling, child, partner or friend.
- Use the "feel, felt, found" method of relating (e.g., "I understand how you feel; I've felt that way before myself, but here is what I found...")
- Offer grief counseling for the staff that have lost residents who were special to them.
- Ask how you can help.
- Offer an employee assistance program (EAP). This is an employee benefit program that assists employees with personal and/or work-related problems that may impact their job performance, as well as their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

Sometimes a shared burden is better than carrying the load alone. Yes, that sounds rather cliché, but when your staff knows you care and want to help them, it can make all the difference.

There are no easy solutions to the current staffing situation for LTC and senior living facilities, but we must acknowledge and take action to support employee wellbeing. Following are some helpful resources.

[Healthcare Wide Hazards: Stress \(OSHA\)](#)

[Stress...At Work \(U.S. Department of Health & Human Services\)](#)

[What Works Best to Prevent Stress Among Healthcare Workers: Changing the organization or educating staff? from CDC](#)

[Coronavirus: Identifying and Easing Stress in Senior Living Residents \(McKnight's Senior Living\)](#)

### Sources:

<sup>1</sup><https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/lower-stress-how-does-stress-affect-the-body>

<sup>2</sup>Karla McLaren, *The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill*. October 1, 2013; BIN 9781622030613



## About the Author

**Jane C. Feagin** is a loss control specialist for the Senior Living Risk Partners division of Gallagher Risk Management Services. She received her degree in nursing from Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham and her BSN from Auburn University at Montgomery. Jane has worked in healthcare for more than 30 years, and the senior living industry has been Jane's primary focus for the past 20 years. She has held various positions including director of healthcare—assisted living, director of marketing—home health and hospice, referral development coordinator for long-term acute care hospitals, long-term care unit manager, resident assessment nurse—SCALF, specialty pharmacy/infusion liaison, and direct patient care provider. Jane also holds a category II assisted living administrator license for Alabama and an assisted living administrator license for Florida. She is a certified risk manager and, in 2017, she received her certification as a Certified Dementia Practitioner® from the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners and has completed the Nursing Home Infection Control Prevention (NIPP) training program with RB Health Partners.

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