

Mental Health Interventions for Pandemic Influenza – Guidance*

Dissemination of guidance such of this can assist in helping individuals, families, government officials, and communities are as emotionally healthy as possible to inoculate them pre-outbreak and assist them to cope during a disease outbreak.

Tips for Individuals and Families

Guidance developed by mental health experts suggests that:

- Emotional and Physical preparedness are some of the most effective ways of addressing the anxiety and stress that may accompany such a serious worldwide disease outbreak.

Strategies for Coping

The two primary strategies for coping with the emotional impact of a pandemic are:

- 1) Education: Factual information about pandemic influenza and its impact;
- 2) Preparation: Personal and family readiness for health emergencies

Predicted Emotional Challenges

There are many emotional challenges that may face individuals and families during a pandemic. These challenges are not limited to the medical impact of a disease outbreak, but include reaction to:

- Organizational and governmental response
- Impact on society
- Personal and social economic disruption
- Pre-existing medical or mental health issues
- Separation from natural sources of support
- Grief and loss of family members and/or friends

Predicted Impact on Society

There are a multitude of ways in which a pandemic would influence society. These include: the:

- Loss of workforce.
- Loss of social capital.
- Many stranded when borders are closed and travel is restricted.
- Loss of personal connections during heightened need for attachment.

Like other disasters and acts of terrorism, the pandemic will magnify preexisting social fractures related to cultural, religious, and economic differences.

Predicted Impact on Individuals and Communities

Many social responses revolve around loss. These losses may include loss of:

- Control.

- Income
- Privacy
- Autonomy
- Valued civil liberties
- Trust (i.e., in government, in humankind, etc)
- Beliefs or faith (i.e., patriotism, religious beliefs, etc)

Economics and Potential Panic

Economics is not just about the financial markets, it is about how rare assets are allocated:

- Vaccines, antibacterial medications, hospital beds, and later perhaps basic necessities will be in tremendous demand.
- Other important goods, such as food, water, and power will be in short supply, as will critical medicines like insulin, heart drugs, and other prescription medications.
- Masks, gloves, antibacterial soaps, and other protective equipment will be in high demand and low supply.
- There is a likelihood of price gouging and the development of a “black market” for essential goods.

Personal Finances

Due to closure of businesses, lost work time related to illness or caring for others, and many other factors, individuals and households may suffer great financial difficulties, such as:

- Little or no personal or household income
- Depletion of any available savings
- Increased dependence on credit to replace income or cover large medical costs
- Price gouging and elevated costs for many basic consumer goods
- Risk of default on loans or mortgages
- Potential for crisis-related financial exploitation

Impact on Individuals’ Medical or Mental Health Problems

Individuals with pre-existing medical or mental issues may encounter increased levels of stress and anxiety, along with disruptions of the health care delivery system. This may impact:

- The ability to travel to receive medications or treatment services
- The ability of field workers to travel to deliver medications or treatment services
- Expedited triage and discharge from hospitals to make way for acute medical patients
- Separation from natural care givers and community support systems

Grief and Loss

Several aspects of the pandemic and public health response may complicate grief and loss reactions. These include the:

- Inability to see loved ones or say “good-bye” to those who may die in the hospital or while separated from family
- Inability to retrieve the body from timely burial or funeral rituals
- Shortage of caskets, burial sites or crematoriums
- Mass stockpiling of corpses until burial or cremation can be facilitated

Unique Challenges for Expatriate Employees and Students Abroad

For those individual working or studying away from their home nations, there may be additional emotional stress associated with:

- Not being able to return home due to travel restrictions, even if loved ones are sick or have died.
- Disruptions in communications systems that prevent contact with loved ones.
- Coping with one’s own illness without the care and comfort of loved ones.

Ethical Issues

Political leaders must consider the emotional consequences of such unavoidable ethical issues as:

- Which groups to prioritize vaccine or antiviral medication?
- How to ration medicines, healthcare services, equipment or basic supplies?
- Should the limited supply of antiviral medications be given to healthy people to reduce the risk of becoming ill, or to ill people to reduce their risk of dying?

Coping with the Emotional Challenges of Pandemic Influenza

1) Normal Emotional Reactions:

- It is normal and understandable to feel anxious and worried about spreading disease, especially if there is not an available cure or enough medicine.
- Anxiety is related to the fear of the unknown, and all of us are vulnerable to this type of reaction at different times and in the face of different threats.

2) Using Natural Supports

- Natural supports, as available, are essential in dealing with threats that do not pass quickly.
- Support from family, friends, clergy and others to whom people naturally turn should be encouraged.
- Schools, faith-based and civic/volunteer organizations also are part of this primary support system.
- It would be helpful to find support systems-people who are thinking about the same issues

you are thinking about the same issues you are thinking about and to share ideas.

Tips for Coping

The following are some useful suggestions for coping with the emotional challenges stemming from pandemic influenza and other health emergencies:

- Limit your exposure to graphic news stories or images
- Get accurate, timely information about disease from credible sources.
- Seek out and follow the advice of experts.
- Maintain as much of a normal daily routine as possible.
- Stay busy, both mentally and physically.
- Communicate when possible with friends, family and supporters.
- Draw upon your spirituality or personal beliefs for comfort.
- Express yourself through writing, poetry, drawing and other arts.
- Talk and share your thoughts and feeling with others.

Staying Healthy

- 1) Pre-pandemic, practicing good health habits is another way of reducing the risk of all types of influenza in your home or family. To stay as healthy as possible:
 - Eat a balanced diet. Be sure to eat a variety of foods, including plenty of vegetables, fruits, and whole grain products. Also, include low-fat dairy products, lean meats, poultry, fish, and beans.
 - Drink lots of water and go easy on salt, sugar, alcohol, and saturated fat.
 - Exercise on a regular basis and get plenty of rest.
- 2) **Take common sense steps to limit the spread of germs. Make good hygiene a habit:**
 - Wash hands frequently with soap and water.
 - Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue if cough or sneeze.
 - Properly dispose of used tissues.
 - Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve if you don't have a tissue.
 - Clean your hands after coughing or sneezing. Use soap or water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner.
 - Stay at home if you are sick.

Limit the Spread of Infection

To limit the spread of germs and prevent infection:

- Teach your children to wash hands frequently
- Teach your children to cover coughs and sneezes with tissues, and be sure to model that behavior.

- Teach your children to stay away from others as much as possible if they are sick. Keep children home from school if they are sick.

Preparedness Facilitates Resilience

- Some of the emotional and behavioral consequences of a pandemic may be mitigated by preparedness efforts.
- Sources of useful preparedness for individuals, families, and communities can be found at:
<http://www.pandemicflu.gov>
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/en/>

Family Preparedness

To plan for a pandemic:

- Talk with family members and loved ones about how they would be cared for if they got sick, or what will be needed to care for them.
- Store a supply of water and food. During a pandemic, if you cannot get to a store, or if stores are out of supplies, it will be important for you to have extra supplies on hand. This can be useful in other types of emergencies, such as power outages and disasters.
- Have nonprescription drugs and other health supplies on hand, including pain relievers, stomach remedies, cough and cold medicines, fluids with electrolytes, and vitamins.
- Encourage family members to volunteer with local groups to prepare and assist with emergency responses.
- Encourage family members to get involved in your community as it works to prepare for an influenza pandemic.

Changes in the Workplace

- Think about what information the people in your workplace will need if you are a manager. This may include information about insurance, leave policies, working from home, possible loss of income, and when not to come to work if sick.
- Meet with your colleagues and make lists of things you will need to know and what actions can be taken.

Anticipate Transportation Problems

Think about how you can rely less on public transportation during a pandemic. For example, store food and other essential supplies so you can make fewer trips to the store.

- Prepare backup plans for taking care of loved ones who are far away.
- Consider other ways to get to work, or if you can, work from home.

**This information comes from a variety of sources, including HHS, CDC, etc.*