***TELEPHONE SUPPORT***

 ***Guide for Counselling***

This is a guide for mental health practitioners who offer telephone support to medical staff or personnel or groups from institutions or agencies. Healthcare professionals often experience secondary trauma during/after major disasters and catastrophes such as the coronavirus outbreak.

**GUIDELINES:**

***Gather Personal Information***: Ask for personal information such as name, telephone number, place of work, job, etc. Keep in mind any privacy policies at the service/institution concerning the gathering of personal information.

***Introduce Yourself and the Intervention Structure***: Introduce yourself and how the intervention will be structured. Clarify that this is a specific and specialized intervention aimed at reducing stress.

* *Self-Introduction*: For example: *“I am……………., I work in the emergency field and I am a member of………. Association”*
* *Introduction of Goals*: “*The aim of this telephone support today is to reduce your stress and the emotional impact you have been experiencing during the Coronavirus outbreak. I want to help you recover and come back to feeling safe in your daily life. Your employer/institution wants you to have whatever psychological support that you need. The purpose is to support you and not to judge what happened or look for whom is responsible. I want to have the opportunity to talk about your experience with you and have a place for you to give voice to your reactions to this critical situation.*

*Ultimately, I will talk to all involved in this emergency situation. The call will not be recorded, and no notes will be taken during the conversation. I am hoping that you will talk with me now. Is that ok with you?”*

***Questions to ask Mental Healthcare Worker***s:

* *“Would you like to tell me how this has been for you?”*
* *“How are you coping?”*
* *“What were your reactions after you realized what was going on?”*
* *“During these days/weeks, did you experience problems in sleeping, eating, concentrating?*
* *“Did you feel more irritable? Or did you have other reactions?”*

***Explanation for Reactions/Psychoeducation Phase***: “*All the reactions you described are normal reactions that normal people have when faced with an abnormal situation. These reactions are known as stress reactions and can last for a few days or go on for several weeks. You have already mentioned some of them. Other symptoms that people might have after a critical event are the following:*

* *Cognitive Symptoms: They include memory and concentration problems, difficulty in problem solving, denial, and/or sense of unreality.*
* *Emotional Symptoms: These symptoms include feeling vulnerable, rage, sadness, anxiety, depression, irritability, and/or numbness.*
* *Behavioural Symptoms: This is when you find yourself doing the following: isolating, avoiding, acting with hostility, changing your eating habits by eating too much or too little, self-medicating, and/or sleeping dysregulation*.

***Coping Questions***:

* ***“****What helped you in facing the event?”*
* *“Were there moments of strength?”*
* *“In the following hours and days, what gave you some relief and help?”*
* *“Every one of us has developed personal strategies to reduce stress in critical moments of our life. What strategies helped you during difficult moments in the past? “*

**Other Strategies Helpful to Reduce Stress:**

* *Self-Knowledge: Understanding the psychological and physical effects of stress and strong emotions, and recognizing the way you react when you are alarmed.*
* *Remember Achievements: Keeping a mental record of your past achievements.*
* *Mental Rehearsal: Use mental rehearsal to help plan how to react in difficult situations.*
* *Words to Avoid: Avoid saying “Why?” or “If only…”*
* *Regulate Basic Functions: Eat and sleep well.*
* *Share Feelings: Write / Talk about how you feel with friends, colleagues, etc.*
* *Take Space for Yourself: Give yourself enough time to breathe and come back to normal functioning.*
* *Physical Activity: Exercise and relax to decrease physical stress. Alternating physical exercise and deep relaxation can decrease chemicals released by stress and can help you to sleep better.*
* *Encourage Routines: Go back to some routine if possible such as your daily tasks, and plan to do activities you enjoy.*

***Further Questions***: Ask, “*Is there anything you would like to add or ask?”*

***Closing Thoughts***: Say, “*Thank you for having shared such private and painful moments in your life. I am at your disposal and, if you agree, we can talk again next week about how you feel and how your reactions* are evolving. I would like to say one last thing: we said that your reactions are normal, but if they persist, they do not go away or they worsen, I am available to help you recover. You can contact me directly at this number…”

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