

# Self-Care Handbook

## Addressing the Psychological Needs of Frontline and Healthcare Staff in Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak

*"Mind YOUR mind  
on the Frontline"*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | <b>Page</b> |
|--|-------------|
| <b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>   | 2           |
| <b>2. PREPARATION PHASE</b>  | 3           |
| 2.1 Overview   | 3           |
| 2.2 Possible Concerns During The Preparation Phase   | 3           |
| 2.3 Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being during the Preparation Phase                                | 4           |
| <b>3. ACTIVE PHASE</b>   | 7           |
| 3.1 Overview   | 7           |
| 3.2 Psychological First Aid  | 7           |
| 3.3 Possible Concerns During The Active Phase  | 7           |
| 3.4 Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being During The Active Phase                                     | 8           |
| <b>4. STAFF BEING TESTED FOR COVID-19 &amp; SELF-ISOLATION</b>   | 11          |
| 4.1 Overview   | 11          |
| 4.2 Possible concerns whilst waiting on test results   | 11          |
| 4.3 Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being while in Self-isolation (whether or not, you have COVID-19) | 12          |
| 4.4 Receiving a COVID-19 diagnosis as a frontline worker   | 13          |
| 4.5 Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being Post-diagnosis  | 14          |
| <b>5. RECOVERY PHASE</b>   | 15          |
| 5.1 Overview   | 15          |
| 5.2 Possible Concerns During the Recovery Phase  | 15          |
| 5.3 Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being in the Recovery Phase                                       | 15          |
| <b>6. APPENDICES</b>   | 18          |
| 6.1 Appendix A - Stepped Psychological Response  | 18          |
| 6.2 Appendix B - Brief Relaxation Exercises  | 19          |
| 6.3 Appendix C - Daily Schedule Template   | 20          |
| <b>7. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED RESOURCES AND WEBSITES</b>  | 21          |
| <b>8. REFERENCES</b>   | 22          |

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### **Minding your Emotional Wellbeing and Building Resilience during the COVID-19 Outbreak**

The wellbeing and emotional resilience of frontline and healthcare workers are key components of maintaining, essential health care services during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. In this handbook, 'frontline' can also refer to family and carers, of individuals supported by services, so therefore, certain aspects of this handbook may be of relevance to this group.

Anxiety, fear and panic is a common experience amongst frontline and healthcare staff during this time. This handbook seeks to provide practical advice and resources to support the well-being of staff, during each psychological, response phase to COVID-19. The psychological response phases are namely, (1) The Preparation Phase, (2) The Active Phase, and (3) The Recovery Phase.

Self-care, is a necessity to protect healthcare workers, and build resilience in the face of psychological adversity. Self-care, for frontline and health care workers, can be complex and challenging, given, that many individuals in these roles are used to prioritising the needs of others, over their own needs.

A self-care strategy, should be multi-faceted and phased properly to support the sense of control and contribution of health care providers, without making them feel unrealistically responsible for the lives of persons supported.

**Most importantly, this is unprecedented. And, you are doing very difficult and very important work, by supporting those most in need.**

***“Remember, it is okay, not to be okay”***



## 2 PREPARATION PHASE

### 2.1 Overview

During the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, you may experience different emotions at different stages. Over the coming days and weeks, you may feel anxious thinking about what could happen, or you may feel a heightened state of 'readiness'. You may also feel stressed, scared, sad, overwhelmed, angry, guilty, helpless, or even numb, or you may not feel any of these. There may be times when you feel you are coping well, and times you feel that you are coping less well. These are all normal responses to an extremely, challenging situation. Everyone is different, and everyone will experience different emotions, at different times.

### 2.2 Possible Concerns During The Preparation Phase

The following, are a range of common concerns that may arise for you, at this time:

- a) Worry about what is to come - You may experience anxiety about the virus in relation to 'what' is coming and 'when' it is coming. 'Not knowing', and feelings of uncertainty, naturally give rise to anxiety. This is a normal response to unprecedented circumstances.
- b) Feelings of being overwhelmed from the news reports and social media - You may experience a range of emotions in response to the regular updates on the news and your social media feed. You may feel overwhelmed and helpless. Regular exposure, to worrying news, may give rise to feelings of anxiety.
- c) Worry about family, friends and loved ones - You may have children at home as a result of crèche or school closures. You may be concerned about the consequences of this, and whether or not you have appropriate measures in place for them while you are at work. You may fear the loss of vulnerable family members, friends and loved ones, from the disease. You may want to protect your vulnerable family members, friends and loved ones, but feel powerless, in how to do so.
- d) Fear of infection - You may worry about the implications of being in contact with the virus and the risk of infection for you. You may worry about the range of consequences of being directed to self-isolate and take time off work. You may also fear the implications of infection, for your family, your friends, and those closest to you.
- e) Increased demands in your work place - You will likely experience an increase in your workload, and a surge in care demands, during the course of this outbreak. For example, you could be asked to work longer hours, provide support to an increasing number of people supported, and you will likely need to keep up to date with best practice on information regarding the virus. You may be redeployed to new areas of work. This increase in demands may lead to feelings of exhaustion, or burn-out.
- f) Financial circumstances - You may have valid financial concerns about a reduced household income over the course of the COVID-19 crisis. This may be for a variety of reasons, for example, you may have chosen to work fewer hours for childcare purposes, or your partner's income may have been negatively affected by the economic effects of the crisis.
- g) Negative perceptions from others - You may worry about being associated with the disease when you are out in public. You may fear that you are going to be socially excluded, or placed in self-isolation, as a result of being associated with the disease.

## 2.3 Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being During The Preparation Phase

To promote resilience and psychological wellness, in the context of the above challenges, you may wish to implement some of the following self-care strategies:

### a) Be patient with yourself in the face of adversity



Increased stress and anxiety, in this uncertain time is a normal and understandable reaction. You are facing a pandemic, which is largely, out of your control. Your body may respond to this complicated situation by exhibiting signs of anxiety (i.e. increased heart rate, rapid breathing, irritability, tense muscles, insomnia, headaches, sweating, shaking and/or worrying thoughts).

These signs of anxiety are simply telling you, that your body is trying to protect you from a threat (be that a real or perceived threat). In response to the threat, your body triggers the 'fight or flight' response, whereby your body is communicating to you, that you need to run away, or fight this threat. In doing so, your body prepares physically i.e. through a burst of adrenaline and an increase in cortisol, which aims to energise you and make you alert. This in turn, can lead to an increase in your heart rate and a change in breathing (which may feel scary at the time).

The key, here, is to remember that these feelings will pass. You will feel safe, calm, and contained again. In times of increased anxiety, relaxation activities will help you to alleviate physical symptoms in the moment (see Appendices).

In addition, focusing on what you can control, as opposed to, what is outside your control, will help to reduce overall anxiety levels during this time. Writing out a list of what is in your control during this uncertain time, will help you to regain feelings of control. You may include, for example, planning and eating healthy meals, scheduling times to phone and check-in on family, friends and loved ones, scheduling and following an exercise routine, and practicing self-care as outlined in his handbook.

### b) Reduce time spent looking at fearful information on the news and social media



News, be that on the television, the newspaper or online, does not always present a balanced account. Generally, news reports focus on the bad news (i.e. people who have died as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, as opposed to those who have recovered).

To prevent your mind and brain from being overwhelmed, reduce your time spent looking at fearful information on the news and on your social media feed. Perhaps introduce a routine, whereby, you limit yourself to checking the updates to once per day from accurate sites and sources.

### c) Practice basic bodily care and take time-out for refreshment



It is important to continue to meet your physical-care needs, in terms of basic bodily care and refreshment. Eat, drink and sleep regularly. Take breaks. Keep to your structure and routine as much as possible in terms of when, and how, you carry out these activities. Humans thrive on structure and routine. Structure and routine foster feelings of, predictability and reassurance, which are pivotal, during uncertain times.

You may also wish to schedule time on a daily basis to engage in a soothing or refreshing activity to encourage time-out and down-time for your mind and body i.e. going for a bath to wind-down in the evening after work, practicing meditation or mindfulness, or using a journal to note your daily gratitude list.

d) Avoid using unhelpful coping strategies



Unhelpful coping strategies may seem appealing in the moment, however, their perceived benefits are normally short-lived.

For example, excessive caffeine, sugar, tobacco, alcohol and/or drugs. These items may provide short term-relief, but, generally have negative longer-term implications i.e. energy drinks may provide you with a burst of false energy, however you may feel a 'crash' shortly after.

e) Regular peer consultation and supervision



Connect with your colleagues and receive support from them. A sense of connectedness, and social support, is vital when facing adversity and challenging times. Attend and engage in regular supervision, where possible.

Communicate in a manner which is wholly positive. Infectious outbreaks can isolate people and result in fear and anxiety. Battle this through positive collaboration; communicate with your colleagues in an optimistic manner, compliment your colleagues, and attempt to work together in a solution-focused style.

f) Practice relaxation exercises



Schedule relaxation activities into your daily routine and/or practice these during times of increased anxiety. These exercises have a vast array of benefits for your mind and body.

These may include deep abdominal breathing, mindfulness, meditation, and progressive muscular relaxation.

For example, deep, slow breathing helps to stimulate our parasympathetic nervous system (the system which calms and soothes us).

Mindfulness meditations help us shift our focus to the present, as opposed focusing on ruminations about the past or future. Of particular worth, mindfulness can help us to observe our thoughts, and make a conscious decision on which thoughts to focus on and give energy to.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is an effective technique for reducing overall body tension as well as psychological stress. By tensing your muscles before relaxing them, you enable yourself to relax them more thoroughly, letting go of physical and psychological tension. Free Apps for download include 'Smiling Mind', 'Insight Timer', 'Stop, Breathe and Think' and 'UCLA Mindful'.

g) Eat a healthy and nutritious diet



The importance of maintaining a healthy and nutritious diet cannot be overlooked in terms of your overall well-being. Healthy and satiating food, will provide you with much required energy, during this demanding time. Moreover, this will boost your immune system and help to protect you from the virus.

Try, insofar as possible, to maintain a healthy and varied diet. Try to consume, three main meals per day and try to eat at the same time, daily. Eat a rainbow of food, which may include protein, carbohydrates, vegetables/fruit and healthy fats. Aim for 2 litres of water per day and limit caffeine, sugar and junk-food intake. However, do not criticise yourself for reaching for that bar of chocolate, or take-away during this complicated time.

h) Engage in physical exercise



Physical exercise is important for your well-being in terms of managing your physical health, and also, in terms of lifting your mood and decreasing anxiety. Scheduling exercise into your daily routine will also help to provide structure and routine to your day.

Physical exercise can include getting out for a walk or run in your local area, participating in an online yoga class, a gym class, or any other creative means (as long as you are adhering to governmental guidelines).

***“There is nothing certain, but the uncertain”***



## 3. ACTIVE PHASE

### 3.1. Overview

While you are working during the 'peak' of the virus outbreak, you may experience a surge of emotions including high stress, anticipatory anxiety and even excitement, as a result of planning with limited time. During this psychological response stage, you may feel the need to rise quickly to the challenge. However, rising quickly can affect your thinking, your boundaries may start to slip, and survival behaviours may start to emerge. As you continue through this psychological response phase, your energy may start to deplete. You may find yourself in automatic pilot. This can be a time of psychological challenge. Neglecting your psychological well-being, during this phase, can have an effect on overall wellbeing.

During the active phase, you may be required to work directly with people who have received a diagnosis of COVID-19. In addition, you may experience redeployment from your normal professional role in the services. For example, multidisciplinary staff may be redeployed to work in a frontline role.

As a frontline staff member, you may also be required to work in an isolation unit. Isolation units have been set-up within the services to provide specialised medical supports to individuals who have been diagnosed with COVID-19. If an individual you support deteriorates, you may be asked to support them in a more specialised hospital setting.

It is important to prepare for every eventuality. In a worst-case scenario, healthcare workers may experience some very difficult things, such as extreme ill-health of clients, or even loss of life.

In your role, you may also hear about others' pain and suffering. Crisis situations, can be very challenging and it can be extremely difficult to bear the pain and suffering of others. These experiences can indeed affect you and your fellow professionals.

### 3.2. 'Psychological First Aid'

During this phase, 'Psychological First Aid' is recommended as an alternative approach to debriefing, as currently, there is mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness and use of 'formal debrief', in response to a global pandemic. 'Psychological First Aid' is an evidence-informed approach, which involves the provision of humane, supportive and practical help to individuals, in the immediate aftermath of a crisis event (see breakdown of 'Psychological First Aid' steps in the recommendation section, on page 9, for further information and Appendix A of this handbook for a visual reference).

### 3.3. Possible Concerns During The Active Phase

You may experience specific stressors while you are working, during the outbreak and providing support to individuals diagnosed with the virus. These stressors may include the following:

- a) The risk of infection transmission - It is likely that due to the risk of infection transmission, visiting restrictions will be put in place for individuals supported, who have been diagnosed with COVID-19. You may be apprehensive about communicating these restrictions to the person supported, and their loved ones. You may also worry about the risk of infection transmission for you, and the implications for your family, friends, and/or loved ones.

- b) The awareness and implementation of best practice measures, policies, procedures and guidelines - You will likely experience pressure to keep up to date with best practice measures, policies, procedures, and guidelines, in terms of supporting individuals supported with a diagnosis of COVID-19.
- c) Equipment challenges and shortages - You may experience equipment challenges. The available equipment may be uncomfortable. It may also limit mobility and communication. In addition, shortages of necessities occur. You may experience feelings of anxiety, frustration and helplessness in relation to, these challenges and shortages.
- d) The physical effects of working in the midst of the outbreak - You may find yourself experiencing physical discomfort in relation to the personal protective equipment that you are required to use. You may feel isolated, as a result of the restrictions regarding physical contact with others, during and, outside of work.
- e) Conflicting personal and professional demands - You will likely experience a complexity of personal and professional demands, while you are working during the COVID-19 outbreak. You may have to temporarily separate from vulnerable family, friends and/or loved ones, while you are working with people who have a diagnosis of COVID-19. You may have to perform your general day-to-day work duties, in addition to the extra demands, required to provide support to individual's with COVID-19. You may find yourself experiencing, inner conflict about the prioritisation of competing demands and needs.
- f) Implications of providing emotional support - You may find yourself providing emotional support, as well as medical care, to individuals supported. Emotional distress can be increasingly difficult to manage. You may feel that it is impacting on your own psychological well-being.

### 3.4. Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being During The Active Phase

To promote your resilience in these trying times, the following evidence-based advice is recommended to healthcare workers:

- a) Regularly seek accurate information and guidance regarding best practice



Schedule a regular time during each shift to check for updates to measures, policies, procedures and guidelines, in supporting people with a diagnosis of COVID-19. Develop a systematic communication system in consultation with your managers and colleagues. For example, create a specific COVID-19 folder for your unit, and update regularly with best practice developments. Allow yourself time to read and familiarise yourself with updates on commencement of each shift.

- b) Brainstorm alternative methods of communication for individuals supported who have visiting restrictions in place



It may be challenging to communicate visiting restrictions to the people you support and their families. Use easy-read materials to explain the reasoning behind these restrictions to the people you support (link with Speech and Language Therapy and/or Psychology regarding the development of appropriate Social Stories).

Brainstorm alternative methods of communication for the people you support, so that social contact can be maintained with family, friends, and loved ones i.e. perhaps using video interactive technology.

c) Ensure you have access to physical safety needs



COVID-19 is pushing our threat system. To help yourself to feel safe, ensure to meet your basic physical needs; eat regularly, stay hydrated, take adequate rest breaks, practice stress management techniques etc.

Meeting your basic physical needs, will help you to feel grounded and thus, reduce the feeling of threat or anxiety, resulting from this unprecedented outbreak.

d) 'Psychological First Aid'



'Psychological First Aid', as defined previously, involves the provision of humane, supportive and practical help, in the immediate aftermath of a crisis event. Meeting your physical safety needs, access to reliable information, utilising peer support and 'Psychological First Aid', are recommended as 'first line' responses, to support psychological wellbeing, in a stepped

response, to the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Psychological First Aid', as opposed to debriefing, encourages individuals' to voice their own story and experience, in a voluntary manner, with a chosen relevant person. In doing so, you may choose to share your story or experience with your fellow colleagues or with management.

e) Foster a spirit of hope and patience



This will be a long road. It will be challenging. However, it is important to be patient with yourself, and the circumstances, in facing this adversity. This will end. A mind-set of hope will help you to overcome the most challenging of circumstances.

f) Check in regularly with colleagues, family, and friends



Due to government guidelines and social distancing recommendations, you may experience certain restrictions in your personal life, with regards to physical contact with your family, friends, and loved ones. However, ensure to schedule regular check-ins to reduce feelings of isolation. Human connection is vital, when facing adversity. Trial alternative methods of social contact, such as video calling on Skype, Google Hangouts, or WhatsApp.

g) Focus on your efforts on what is, within your power



Acknowledge, what you were able to do to help others, and recognise the limits to what you can do. Remind yourself of the efforts you have made to care for others, and acknowledge the aspects of your work that had a positive outcome. It is important that you are realistic in your expectations of what is possible for you to achieve in your professional role.

Worrying about things that are out of your control might include, wondering about what the future holds, how the virus will affect you, your family, the country, or the world. It's a natural thing to get lost in worries like these. However, the more emphasis placed on what is outside of your control, the greater sense of hopelessness and anxiety, you are likely to feel.

h) Take brief relaxation/stress management breaks



Try to manage your anxiety, by avoiding the over-generalisation or catastrophizing your fears. Focus on the facts and on what is within your control. Remember, feeling anxious is a normal response to these unprecedented circumstances. These feelings will pass.

Making efforts to implement relaxation and stress management techniques, whilst working front-line during the peak of crisis, may sound very difficult, or even impossible. However, some short relaxation techniques may provide relief to symptoms of stress and anxiety.

Apps such as Breathe, Calm and Headspace can guide you, through short relaxation exercises. There are also some simple instructions to brief relaxation exercises included in the Appendix B of this handbook.

i) Talk about your experience through regular peer consultation and supervision



Work in partnership, or in teams, to reduce feelings of isolation. Schedule and attend regular peer consultation and supervision. This will help to maintain, a sense of connectedness. If you feel comfortable doing so, voice your concerns, your feelings and story, during this testing time. It is likely that your colleagues will relate.

You may witness colleagues in emotional distress. This may be difficult to witness and you may be unsure, of how to respond to them. “This is tough, are you okay?” may be a helpful response, if you are comfortable in doing so.

**NB:** It is advised, that peer consultation and supervision does not take the form of single-session debriefing. Instead, it is recommended that a non-intrusive, compassionate, attitude is shared between co-workers. Staff are encouraged, to allow peers to talk about their experiences, as little or as much, as they wish to. It is important to never push for information or ask for the retellings of events. Instead, focus on practical assistance with immediate needs; providing safety and comfort, and establishing connections, with primary support networks and social resources.

j) Rest and relax between shifts.



When you are exposed to high-pressure environments, it can be hard to ‘wind-down’ outside of work hours. However, this has never been more pertinent. Many of the self-care activities outlined previously, in this document, are relevant for implementation during your time off work e.g. mindfulness/relaxation, exercise, reading.

k) Seek help, if you need it



If you are having upsetting thoughts or memories about events you experience, or extreme nervousness or sadness, have difficulty sleeping, or drink a lot of alcohol or take drugs, it is important to get support from someone you trust. Speak to a health care professional or, if available, a mental health specialist if these difficulties persist.

## 4. STAFF BEING TESTED FOR COVID-19 & SELF ISOLATION

### 4.1. Overview

In your role, you may be at increased risk of contracting COVID-19. If you present with symptoms associated with the virus, you may be asked to self-isolate, and to undergo the appropriate testing.

Self-isolation whilst waiting on test results, can be the cause of significant fear, anxiety and stress. This is a normal response, to dealing with uncertain circumstances and upheaval to your daily life.

### 4.2. Possible concerns whilst waiting on test results

While waiting on test results you may be concerned about:

- a) The possibility of receiving a positive COVID-19 test result - When advised to self-isolate, it is common to fear the possibility that you are infected, or indeed fear that you may have infected others. Some people may experience catastrophic appraisals of any symptoms they experience, during a period of imposed self-isolation. This is common amongst individuals that have been exposed to an infectious disease. It can be intensified by circulation of misinformation and scare-mongering. It is important therefore, that all information you access during this period, is from a reliable source.
- b) The impact your absence from work, may have on persons you support, in your day-to-day job - As a health care professional, there may be individuals whom you support that you are concerned about, whilst you are in self-isolation. Your concern may be for their health in these circumstances, or you may have other concerns about their wellbeing or safety. As a healthcare professional, it can be difficult to 'switch off' from your responsibilities. Remind yourself, that your self-isolation is both to protect you, and those that you support.
- c) The impact your absence from work may have on other staff - You may also find yourself concerned about, the impact of your absence on other staff members, whilst you are in self-isolation. You may experience feelings of guilt, wondering whether the staff team are coping with the surge in care in demands. To ease unnecessary guilt, try to remind yourself that your self-isolation is to protect you, those that your support, and your fellow staff team.
- d) The impact on your role as a mother/father/brother/sister/son/daughter/partner - Self-isolation will, of course, impact upon your personal life too. You may be concerned about the health and well-being of your family members. You may feel angry or resentful, that your professional role may have put you at risk, of becoming infected with COVID-19. This may have a knock-on effect on your personal life and relationships. It is normal to feel such emotions, and it is important that you have an avenue, to express such emotions e.g. someone to talk to, a diary, artwork etc.
- e) Your mental/emotional health - Increased stress and anxiety during self-isolation is a common experience. Indeed, it is normal to feel isolated and lonely during this time too. Continue to practice things, that usually give you stress relief, albeit, with the adaptations necessary in your current circumstances. The next section gives examples of healthy ways to manage current stressors.

### 4.3. Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being while in Self-isolation (whether or not, you have COVID-19)

If you are feeling unwell due to the illness, seek and follow the advice of a medical professional with regard to choosing the most appropriate recommendations for you, at this time. Whether you test positive for COVID-19, or not, self-isolation can be a very trying period of time. The advice below is recommended, to support your psychological wellbeing whilst in isolation.

#### a) Keep in contact with family and friends via phone or video calls



Make sure that you stay in touch with friends, family and neighbours. This can help to ease any feelings of loneliness you and others may experience while in isolation. Technology can help with this enormously.

Call or video call your friends, colleagues and relatives regularly to see how they are.

Create group conversations, calls or video calls, with neighbours, family or friends using apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, or Viber. Share how you're getting on and ask other people how they are.

#### b) Maintain structure in your day as much as possible, with a regular sleeping and eating routine



Being out of normal routine through self-isolation, can in itself cause difficulties for many individuals. Some people who are self-isolating, may have difficulties with sleep (insomnia), feelings of restlessness or sadness, or may start to feel demotivated.

To combat these problems, it is important to maintain clear structure to your day. Having a set schedule for meal times and a set bedtime can help you to stay on track. A daily schedule template can be found in Appendix C of this handbook. Planning out activities and setting goals can also keep you motivated and help to reduce the experience of low mood.. It can be useful to break larger goals down, into smaller more short-term manageable goals.

#### c) Read books and magazines



Try to limit the amount of time reading and watching news articles, to that which is necessary. Excessively checking for updates can be exhausting, both physically and emotionally.

Take a break from reading COVID-19 related material, and pick up a book or magazine, that maybe you haven't had time to read in the past. Again, there are many free-access and low-cost books available online, from websites such as, Amazon Kindle or Audible.

#### d) Reinvent or transform yourself



If you are feeling well enough, self-isolation, can be used as a time to reinvent yourself, in terms of taking up a new interest or hobby. You may find that you now have the time and energy to try out a past-time you have always intended to. For example, you may have always wanted to learn how to play a musical instrument, how to stitch or how to bake.

If you are stuck for ideas, there are endless ideas on google. You may also want to set yourself a personal challenge or goal. For example, you may wish to practice yoga every morning for a week, or you may like to read a book per week.

Be creative, but also, ensure you don't push yourself too hard. As always, follow the advice of a medical professional, with regards to implementing any physical hobbies, interests or past-times.

e) Continue to engage in physical exercise if possible



Following medical advice, is particularly important with regards to your engagement in physical activity, if you have been given a diagnosis.

Home based exercises, and following HSE advice on physical activity guidelines, could be beneficial to you both mentally and physically, during the course of self-isolation.

If you are feeling well and given the all clear by a medical professional to engage in physical exercise, the following are some ideas for you to adopt:

1. Walk extra steps in-doors or using stairs – even one step up and down- is better than sitting or lying most of the day. You may already have an activity-tracker on your watch or smart phone, that can help you track daily movement
2. Dance to your favourite music
3. Use a skipping rope
4. Use home cardio machines if you have access
5. Be creative -- If watching TV, get up during every add break (or periodically) and do a lap around your home or an active chore e.g. do the laundry, do the dishes, or take out the bins
6. There is vast access to online fitness classes and exercise demonstrations via social media and YouTube. Many websites, apps, and gyms have made access to their content free of charge. Your local gym may also be releasing content online, check out their social media accounts

#### 4.4. Receiving a COVID-19 diagnosis as a frontline worker

If you receive a positive test result, and receive a diagnosis of COVID-19, you may be concerned about:

- a) Your physical health - It is normal to experience some concern about your health having received a diagnosis of COVID-19. Try to avoid over-using the internet to research your symptoms. Rely only, on advice from trusted sources.
- b) The possibility that you may have infected others -You may be worried that you carried the infection long enough to pass it on to others; your family, friends, colleagues, or clients you work with. Whilst these are all possibilities, remember, that this is a highly infectious disease, and you are not the sole-carrier. Contact-tracing will likely occur, and this is to protect the health of your friends, family, and community and limit further spread of the disease.
- c) Negative perceptions from others - Individuals exposed to, and who contract an infectious disease can experience negative perceptions from others. Sometimes, this is as a result of misinformation about the disease, or a misrepresentation of the facts associated with it. COVID-19 is an infectious disease that can affect anyone exposed to it. In your role as a healthcare worker, you may have been at higher risk of contracting the infection. This may be due to the number of individuals you interact with on a daily basis, or because, you were caring for an individual who was already infected. This should not warrant the experience of negative perceptions from others.

#### 4.5. Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being Post-diagnosis

The following are a list of activities recommended, to support your wellbeing post-diagnosis:

- a) Follow the medical advice of your GP/Public Health/Occupational Health Doctor



It is pertinent, that you follow medical advice during this time period, and seek informed advice from qualified professionals only. The experience of COVID-19 is unique to the individual, with a range of severity.

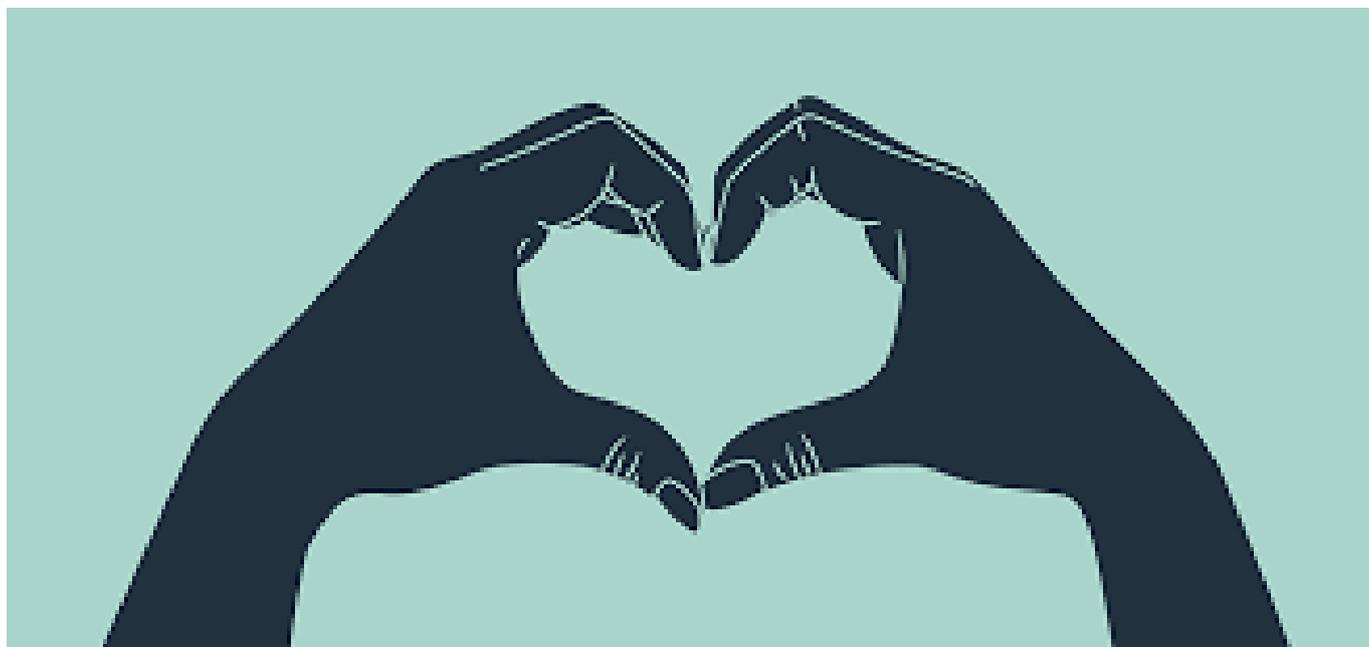
- b) Be self-compassionate.



Self-compassion entails being warm towards oneself, when encountering pain and personal challenges, rather than, ignoring them or hurting oneself with self-criticism. Do not be hard on yourself for contracting COVID-19.

Self-kindness, is an antidote to fear. Kindness regulates fear, through connection and warmth, similar, to what we might experience with a dear friend. Some guided self-compassion exercises and meditations can be found at: <https://centerformsc.org/practice-msc/guided-meditations-and-exercises/>

***“A moment of self-compassion, can change your entire day”***



## 5. RECOVERY PHASE

### 5.1. Overview

Recovery and long-term psychological impacts should be considered. It is important, when the crisis is over that we do not return immediately to business as usual, without considering the long-term psychological needs of our workforce.

### 5.2. Possible Concerns During the Recovery Phase

There are many ways in which people may respond to a crisis, such as a global health pandemic:

- a) Staffs' experience may impact on their emotional wellbeing in a range of ways - Some individuals may experience no upset, or only experience mild, temporary and predictable levels of distress in the recovery phase. Some others, may be somewhat more distressed, but continue to function appropriately in their daily lives. Finally, some individuals may experience higher levels of distress, at a level that has a negative impact on their ability to function in their daily lives appropriately. These individuals may recover relatively quickly, given appropriate assistance, but some may also develop further difficulties that require further psychological assessment and/or intervention.
- b) Exhaustion and Feeling Overwhelmed - In the recovery phase, it is natural to experience a degree of exhaustion and exposure to feeling overwhelmed. Exposure to high levels of adrenaline, for a sustained period of time, will take some time to recover from.
- c) Secondary Stressors - In addition to the primary stressors of stress and anxiety experienced, as a direct result of working during this time of crisis, a number of secondary stressors could also be experienced. These may include, disruption and dislocations in people's lives, in terms of attachments, families, homes, employment, communities and recreation.

### 5.3. Recommendations to Support Your Psychological Well-being In The Recovery Phase

- a) Opportunities for decompression



You could implement, many of the stress and anxiety management techniques discussed in this document, in the recovery phase. In addition, decompression should include allowing additional time for taking stock, reflecting on events, and integrating these experiences. For many, this is a gradual process that can be worked through alone, or, with the social support from others.

However, some individuals may require additional support, in the form of psychological assessment and/or intervention (see Appendix A for 'Stepped Psychological Response'), to facilitate reflection and processing of experiences. Psychological assessment and/or intervention may be necessary for individuals, who continue to struggle, post the implementation of lower levels of psychological care i.e. through meeting basic physical needs, accessing reliable information, utilising peer support and 'Psychological First Aid'. It is important, that you discuss any concerns you have, relating to your psychological or mental health during the recovery phase. Interventions, during the recovery phase, should NOT entail 'single-session stress debriefing', but should facilitate, the time necessary, for you to explore distressing thoughts and memories with an appropriate professional.

b) Active listening



In the recovery phase of this crisis, active listening will benefit you and your colleagues. Again, a non-intrusive, compassionate attitude, should be fostered by co-workers, supervisors and frontline staff. Individuals, should have opportunity to talk about experiences as little or as much as they wish to, with no pressure to share information, or to re-tell events.

c) Management could organise active learning events that involve healthcare staff at all levels



Frontline staff will have had a unique experience over the course of the crisis. In the recovery phase, their experience and expertise should be valued and listened to, in the development of future preparedness, crisis-management and mitigation plans.

d) Organise thanks and rewards for 'the everyday going above and beyond'



It can be beneficial to express gratitude and organise thanks and rewards for colleagues that have worked above and beyond, what is generally expected as part of their role. Staff will have gone to great lengths to carry out their daily job, in very difficult circumstances, and this should be acknowledged. This will benefit staff morale, and interdisciplinary relationships.

e) Ongoing peer support



It is advised that on-going peer consultation and support continues for the months and years post-crisis. The recovery phase will not take place overnight. Rather, it will be an on-going process, requiring staff to work together and support each other through a period of readjustment.

f) Management could carry out a needs assessment of staff



A needs assessment of staff, would involve taking note of what they found helpful during this time, what ongoing input would they want now, and in the future. Line management should emphasise, access to employee wellbeing resources and services, or advise staff in, how they might access evidence-based psychological therapies.

g) Everyone is different, voice what you need



All individuals will respond to stress in a unique way. There are a variety of reasons why one person may experience heightened distress, when another may not, whilst exposed to a similar situation. Try not to compare yourself directly, to your colleagues or other individuals. Your feelings, and experience, are valid, regardless of how others may have responded to similar circumstances. Seek appropriate support, if, and when you need it.

h) Remember, positives can also come from this



Many people experience personal growth or development in response to psychological challenges and adversity. Try to be open, to recognising your own strengths in overcoming the challenges you have experienced during this trying time. Going forward, this experience may provide you with hope and optimism, when faced with adversity in the future.

***“Grow through your experiences”***

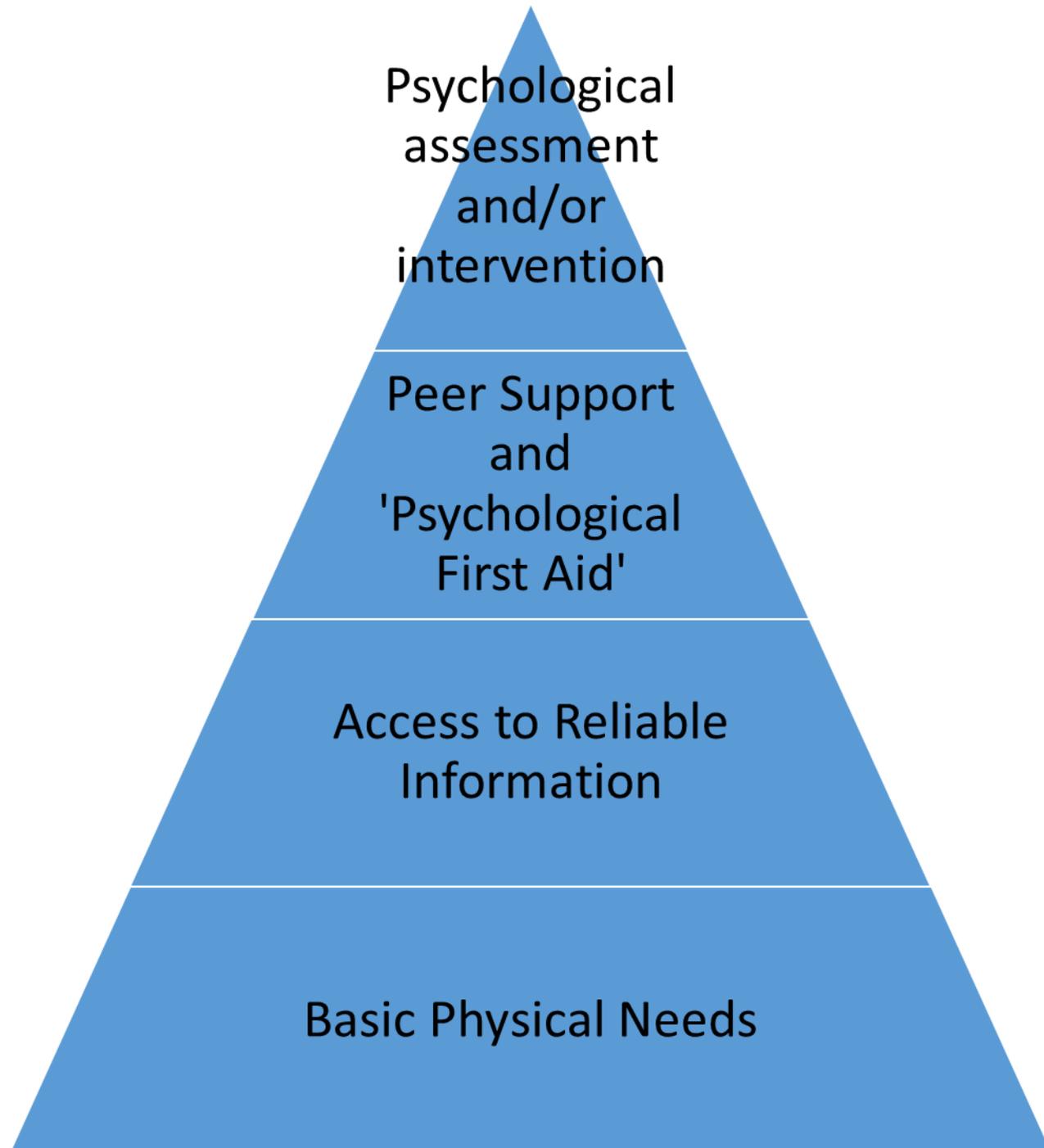


## 6. APPENDICES

### 6.1. Appendix A

#### Stepped Psychological Response

Figure 1, explains the stepped delivery of formal psychological care, to frontline and healthcare staff, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Figure 1, is based on the model that has been developed by the British Psychological Society (2020), in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



*Figure 1.* Stepped psychological response

## 6.2. Appendix B

### Brief Relaxation Exercises

- **One Minute Relaxation Exercise**

Place your hand underneath your navel, so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Breathe in. Pause for a count of three. Breathe out. Pause for a count of three. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation.

Or alternatively, while sitting comfortably, take a few slow deep breaths and quietly repeat to yourself "I am" as you breathe in and "at peace" as you breathe out. Repeat slowly, two or three times. Then, feel your entire body relax into the support of your chair.

- **Two Minute Relaxation Exercise**

Count down slowly, from 10 to 0. With each number, take one complete breath, inhaling and exhaling. For example, breathe in deeply, saying "10" to yourself. Breathe out, slowly. On your next breath, say "nine", and so on. If you feel lightheaded, count down more slowly to space your breaths further apart. When you reach zero, you should feel more relaxed. If not, go through the exercise again.

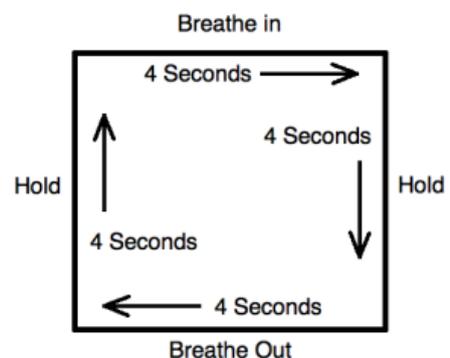
- **Three Minutes Relaxation Exercise**

While sitting, take a break from whatever you're doing. Check your body for tension. Relax your facial muscles and allow your jaw to open slightly. Let your shoulders drop. Let your arms fall to your sides. Allow your hands to loosen, so there are spaces between your fingers. Uncross your legs or ankles. Feel your thighs sink into your chair, letting your legs fall comfortably apart. Feel your shins and calves become heavier, and your feet grow roots into the floor. Now, breathe in slowly, and breathe out slowly.

- **Square Breathing Relaxation Exercise**

This breathing exercise is illustrated here:

1. Breathe in for 4 seconds
2. Hold breath for 4 seconds
3. Breathe out for 4 seconds
4. Count to 4 before beginning the cycle again



- **Progressive Muscular Relaxation Exercise**

Get yourself into a comfortable sitting position. Apply muscle tension to a specific part of your body by squeezing this body part until you can feel tension, and counting to 5, while you take a breath in. Really squeeze, the body part. Perhaps, you may like to start with your hand by making a fist as you squeeze and tense. Next, count to 5 again as you relax this body part. Exhale, as you relax and release the tension, counting to 5. Remain in this relaxed state for 15 seconds, before moving on to the next body part.

The different muscle parts in your body you may like to focus on during this exercise may be your feet, your hands, your legs (upper and lower), your buttocks, your stomach, your chest, your neck and shoulders, your mouth, your eyes and finally, your forehead.

6.3. Appendix C

Daily Schedule Template

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

**WEEK BEGINNING** \_\_\_\_\_

| <b>Time</b>    | <b>Monday</b> | <b>Tuesday</b> | <b>Wednesday</b> | <b>Thursday</b> | <b>Friday</b> | <b>Saturday</b> | <b>Sunday</b> |
|----------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| <b>8 AM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>9 AM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>10 AM</b>   |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>11 AM</b>   |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>12 NOON</b> |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>1 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>2 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>3 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>4 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>5 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>6 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>7 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>8 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>9 PM</b>    |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>10 PM</b>   |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |
| <b>11 PM</b>   |               |                |                  |                 |               |                 |               |

## 7. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED RESOURCES AND WEBSITES

### Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information

- Health Service Executive (HSE)  
[www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/](http://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/)
- Irish Government  
[www.gov.ie/en/news/7e0924-latest-updates-on-covid-19-coronavirus/](http://www.gov.ie/en/news/7e0924-latest-updates-on-covid-19-coronavirus/)
- European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)  
[www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19-pandemic](http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19-pandemic)
- World Health Organisation  
[www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus](http://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus)

### Mindfulness, Relaxation and Wellbeing

- Headspace – mindfulness for your everyday life  
[www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)
- Calm – sleep, meditation and relaxation  
[www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com)
- Down Dog – yoga app  
[www.downdogapp.com](http://www.downdogapp.com)
- Cosmic Kids Yoga  
[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- Harvard Medical School – 6 relaxation techniques to reduce stress  
[www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/six-relaxation-techniques-to-reduce-stress](http://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/six-relaxation-techniques-to-reduce-stress)
- Joe Wicks 'The Body Coach Tv'  
[www.thebodycoach.com/](http://www.thebodycoach.com/)

### General Wellbeing Advice for Healthcare Workers

- Mind the Frontline – a mental health resource for all healthcare workers  
[www.mindthefrontline.com](http://www.mindthefrontline.com)
- COVID Trauma Response Working Group – trauma informed responses to the COVID outbreak  
[www.traumagroup.org/](http://www.traumagroup.org/)
- Advice for HSE Staff Responding to COVID-19. Prepared by Daniel Flynn, Principal Psychology Manager, Cork/Kerry Mental Health Services  
[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) – search 'Calm – tips for healthcare workers to manage our emotional response to unprecedented circumstances'

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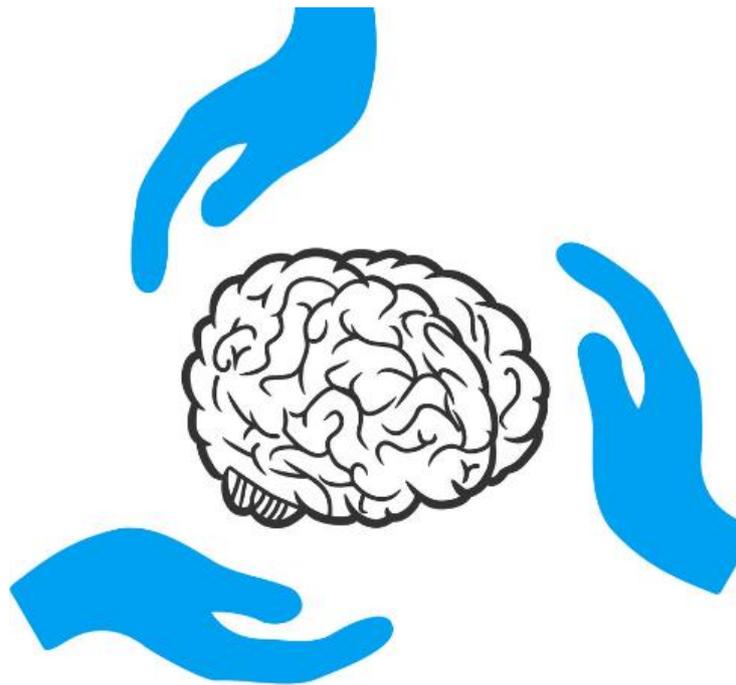
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# "Mind YOUR mind on the Frontline"



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