

Supporting the Mental Health of Health Workers during COVID-19.

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Acknowledging the impacts of the challenging context of COVID-19 for health workers, this workshop explored some of the experiences of health care workers in Vietnam and discussed strategies to support their mental health and wellbeing.

The online workshop was facilitated by the Oxford Clinical Research Unit Vietnam (Healthcare Engagement Programme), the Centre for Healthcare Improvement Research (CHIR), and Wake up schools International on 5th April 2020.

The online workshop involved the following participants:

Speakers:

- **Dr Orla O'Sullivan:** International Mindfulness teacher, International Co-ordinator for Wake-up Schools, advisor to the World Happiness Festival.
Works with Irish healthcare workers, educational psychologists, not for profits, social workers, cancer patients, and community groups to support wellbeing, reduce the impact of stress and strengthen happiness. <https://www.orlaithosullivan.com/>
- **Le Thi My Hang:** Coordinator Wake Up Schools Vietnam, Mindfulness trainer.
With her experience in guiding teachers in Mindfulness, she is an active participant in Mindfulness training programs for the community and organizations to improve physical and mental health. <https://wakeupschools.org/>
- **Nguyen Thuy Tien:** Co-founder and CEO of the Breast Cancer Network Vietnam (BCNV). Tien was listed in the Top 30 Under 30 in 2016 by Forbes Vietnam and was a Viet Nam Outstanding Young Face of 2015. She is involved in BCNV's launch of a series of projects for breast cancer patients. <https://bcnv.org.vn/en/my-front-page/>

Facilitators:

- Nguyen Thi Kim Ngoc: (MSc Education): Senior Public and Community Engagement, OUCRU-Vietnam.
- Doctor Linh Phan- CEO of Centre for Healthcare Improvement Research (CHIR), HCMC, Vietnam.

Guests:

- Dr Nguyen Son Lam: Lecturer at University of Medicine, Doctor at the Hospital University of Medicine (Department of Nephrology), Cho Ray Hospital.
- Dr Duong Duy Khoa: Lecturer in Department of Internal Medicine, Doctor at University of Medicine Hospital (Respiratory Department), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
- Mrs Nguyen Le Binh: Paediatrician Psychologist, Teacher at Pham Ngoc Thach Medical University, HCMC, Vietnam
- Mrs Nguyen Thi Le Hong: Head of Medical Social Work Department- Hospital of Tropical Diseases, HCMC, Vietnam

I. Group discussion on Healthcare Worker stress

1. What are the key factors impacting the mental health and stress levels of health care workers during the COVID-19 outbreak?

- **Stress and pressure:**

"What I'm going through is anxiety during the pandemic season, sometimes it's panic" (Dr Khoa). Doctors who are on the frontline working directly with affected patients have been under great pressure and stress, working long hours, with concerns about their own health and safety, and with responsibility to ensure the full recovery of patients within an uncertain context.

The ripple effect of the uncertainty and responsibility felt by health care workers and their stress levels can negatively impact others they interact with.

- **Fear of the spread of infection within the community:**

This pandemic has spread very quickly and the amount of information available about the virus has been much lower compared to its microbiological progress. The greater the risk of infection from the virus, the greater the impact on the social life and interactions of the community and heightening fears of further infection amongst the community. The healthcare workers feel responsible in their role to protect the community.

- **Impacts on workloads:**

With the significantly large number of patients admitted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the working hours for doctors and other health care workers have been prolonged in order to meet the demands of the number of people needing to be seen. Health care workers in the departments of infection barely have time to eat, drink water, or go to the toilet. This has all been exacerbated by the protective gear (full protective suit, glasses and masks) they were needing to wear, which were difficult to take on and off, and also affected their breathing. As a result, many wore their protective outfits for long hours, became exhausted if they didn't eat or get enough sleep, became dehydrated from limiting their liquid intake, and worried about avoiding infection for themselves and their patients. Their normal routines and behaviours were being significantly impacted.

- **Fear of being infected:**

The fear and worry of being infected and quarantined away from their family and work responsibilities significantly raised the stress levels of health care workers. Those who were parents had the additional concerns of whether they should send their children away to family members for their safety and wellbeing. Others stayed away from their homes to ensure they didn't risk infecting family members.

When the doctor was treating a sick person, who was coughing, the doctor did not know if they were coughing due to Covid-19 or not. Or when family members were coughing, there was the question whether they were infected? This uncertainty, together with worry about whether as a doctor he may have the disease (and its symptoms may not have manifested yet) and risks spreading it to his family members impacted stress levels.

For female healthcare workers with children and family responsibilities; they worried whether they should work and risk infecting their own children: “If I was infected, how would it affect my family life? I’m worried about our future.”

Doctors working in different wards but within the same treating hospital as those with COVID-19 cases, could hear people coming in and out of the department spraying disinfectant to reduce the transmission of the virus, and knew someone was infected. This led to changed behaviours as they started to take the stairs instead of the elevator, and restricted contact with other staff. At first, it was very frightening and later there was a greater understanding that this was one of the steps required to prevent the spread of the disease to other patients.

- **Confusing and changing policies:**

The changing government policies about procedures in response to the virus, the reduction in the supply of available masks and protective equipment, raised concerns as to how health care workers could ensure they remained safe when patients continued to come in for treatment.

- **Information from social media:**

The doctors have tried to keep informed by reading articles online and found the many contradictions and speculations have caused additional anxiety. This raised the question for them as to how to keep a balance of reading responsibly to keep aware and reading too much causing additional anxiety.

- **Isolation issue:**

Healthcare workers working directly with Covid-19 patients have been isolated from others in the community by staying in a hotel arranged by the Department of Health in Ho Chi Minh city. They are separated from family and this causes additional worry about their family members, especially their children. The Head of the Social work Department at Hospital of Tropical Disease confirmed that Healthcare workers worried about missing their children but understood that due to of their duties, they should take care of the patients and protect their family members by not going to their homes during this critical period of time.

2. What can we do to help healthcare workers in the frontline to balance their stress and anxiety?

The mental and physical health of health care workers is key and can affect how well they work during the pandemic. If they are stressed or exhausted, this can impact their capacity to provide quality health care, therefore supporting their mental health improves the quality of life for both healthcare workers and patients

Advice from the guest group:

- **Prioritising care for healthcare workers directly supporting Covid-19 cases:**

Even after work hours, Healthcare workers were afraid of being infected, even though they were well trained to understand the Covid-19 risks and how to protect themselves. The Hospital of Tropical Diseases tried to provide adequate and prioritised masks for Healthcare workers working directly with infected cases . Other non-clinical staff used

cloth masks to save the medical masks for those treating Covid-19 patients, and providing meals to staff directly to limit them having to leave the wards.

Due to the safety provisions, Social workers can only support in a limited way but ensured that with donor support they could send food directly to Healthcare Workers who were working in the front line.

- **Support to stressed staff:**

During that critical time, people who were feeling stressed could join online conferences or small workshops on mindfulness to support them to recognize the imbalance in their body and explore ways to manage this.

Recognising and voicing their stress and why they feel this way can reduce their internal stress. Utilising a technique of encouraging cancer patients to list out the reasons why they felt stressed during the pandemic, is a technique encouraged by Thuy Tien of the Breast Cancer Network:

"I'm really uncomfortable, I'm more worried, I have more pain. This can help them realize what and why it happened. When they identify and call out their inner emotions, they'll have ways to work with those anxious emotions, which is the very first step. If the person is in control of their emotions, they can work with the doctor because of their positive energy inside. When a stressed-out person encounters another, it's likely that the two of them will be stressed out even more. The opposite can be said, when two less stressed individuals interact, their work flow would improve. This is how I think it will help medical staff to reduce stress, which is very stressful at this stage."

- **Be aware of how you are reacting – is it emotional or physical stress?**

During the lockdown time, there was a feeling of peace, the streets were quiet, the number of cases of mourning of incidence was slowing down in Vietnam.

"But when I saw the world situation of cases increasing, I felt peaceful. Working in the department, before screening, I have to screen the patients, the responsibility and the greater pressure and ensure the safety of all medical staff and patients. This line of work is also scary. The other volume is at the Medical University, which is mobilizing to train the students who are doctors or nurses in the final year to participate in the prevention of pandemics. Agreeing with Dr. Binh's opinion, the physical stress may be more."

Doctor Khoa.

- **Look after yourself also.** Working in medicine doctors have to read more information and keep regularly updated and informed, but no matter how you work, it is imperative to try to get enough sleep, because sleep is very important. Health care workers need to strengthen their immune health and psychological wellbeing.
- **Introducing new methods to address stress amongst medical staff and their patients:**
The University of Medicine has set up the Department of Palliative Care, the first in Vietnam. This department does not really focus on treating all the illnesses but on the quality of life from the time the patient is treated to the end of treatment or death. That discipline is interested not only in physical health but also in psychology. They have organized psychosocial or meditation seminars, they invited psychologists to come or the

social work that social workers have learned about psychology, teaches mindfulness to support patients.

The University of Medicine Hospital has a Meditation Club with instructions for health workers to participate and meditate every Friday . It is available to 20 health workers (doctors, nurses, psychologists or administrative staff- anyone wishing to participate in support of patients). This model is similar to the mindfulness model of Plum Village in Thailand. In addition, there is group therapy and the staff of the Faculty of Palliative Care, are teaching about mental health to combat stress or exhaustion amongst health workers.

Workshops, such as this also introduce methods and techniques such as Mindfulness and can balance in a practical way the heavy content of discussions about stress, burn out, and the empathy of Health Care Workers.

II. Mindfulness practice – being aware and reducing stress

With the understanding of the pressure on health workers, Orla O’Sullivan introduced these practical mindful tools as a guide for addressing stress and being aware of the moment.

Below is a series of exercises as a guide. See the youtube link listed below to view the recording. Our hope at Mindful is to provide realistically accessible mindfulness practices to support people physically and mentally. Whether we have ten minutes or an hour to care for ourselves, we invite people to take time to sustain ourselves. Orla has shared a series of guided practices below.

Connecting with your body

Discover where your foot is, let your awareness fill your foot so you sense it from the inside.

Be aware of the sensory data that your brain is receiving – what your foot is touching. Be aware of contact with the floor, the pressure of the shoe around your foot. If you imagined scanning your foot with a thermal scanner, can you find the warmest part of your foot – the part that would glow orange-red under the scan.

Can you draw your focus to just the top of your foot: to the top of your foot, the top of your toes. Then bring your awareness back to the heel of your foot. And draw your attention decadently, slowly along the sole of your foot, as though you were mapping out this landscape. Be aware of the perimeter of your footprint, the curve of your arch, sensing your footprint... coming in to your toe pads to complete your footprint – you can press or wiggle them to see if you’re really there.

Be aware your whole foot – you might get a sense of what kind of mood your foot is in. Is it tired, calm, restless, relaxed, maybe bored? There is nothing to fix, we’re just looking. Taking a moment to recognize that this is how I’m feeling right now.

This practice can help healthcare workers release their attention.

What is the mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. For example, mindfulness of your foot. It is the continuous practice of touching ourselves deeply in every moment of our daily life and whenever we bring our awareness to our foot, to a cup of tea, to the sky, to steps as we walk, sit, eat or work -the energy of our awareness is the same. When we generate the energy of mindfulness, we generate a way of being that is awake, kind, curious, open. We spend a lot of our time on autopilot, running through the day. With mindfulness we wake up to this moment of our life.

Our mind is the greatest time traveller – it revisits the past all the time, especially if there was a painful experience. We replay it over and over. And our mind goes forward to the future constantly – imagining all the different things that could happen. And research shows us that our habit of ‘automatic time travelling’ makes us anxious and distracted, and less effective. So, with mindfulness we begin by STOPPING the constant time travelling. And to do this we start with our body, because our body is always here in the present moment. It’s a very safe place to start.

Connecting with your breath

In the second practice with a focus on our breath, Orla asked the participants follow her instructions.

And the easiest anchor to bring ourselves home to our body is our breath. At any moment you’re either breathing in or breathing out. And if you’re doing neither – then you have bigger problems to worry about!

Simply rest your attention on your breath as though you were carrying heavy bags – and you’ve been carrying them for too long – and you finally get to put them all down. Our practice should be that pleasant!

Sensing the many movements in your body as this breathing process occurs – you can bring the eyes of a scientist to it. The sense of opening and expansion with your ‘in’ breath, and the sense of release, letting go with your ‘out’ breath. We try mono-tasking with that. Your ‘in’ breath – opening and expanding. Your ‘out’ breath, letting go, giving more of your weight to the chair. letting go.

Like a low wave coming in from the ocean, washing through your whole body. Then as the wave draws back it can soften any tight muscles, any holding, any inflammation. In and out. Imagine the wave is coming from an ocean of calm, flooding through every cell in your body, bringing calm and peace. 37.2 trillion cells in an average human body. 37.2 trillion cells all working to support you in this moment. And your precious breath drawing in calm and ease, lighting up every cell with the potential to rest and heal and refresh.

A practice in a short time to help healthcare workers release their attention.

Your body is always listening to your thoughts

After the breath instruction, Orla expressed that with mindfulness, we learn to STOP and we learn to LET GO. And what will happen is that we might stay for a moment or two, and then we get

distracted. And that's so normal. It's good to know that everything will always happen. We have an average attention span of 8 seconds. That's shorter than the attention span of a goldfish.

Our mind is quite wild, and it's never been taught how to focus. We're taught 'pay attention!' but not how to pay attention. So, we have these untrained minds, and they're used to following every thought around. On average, a human mind thinks between 50,000 and 80,000 thoughts every single day. And research shows us that about 70% of those thoughts are negative. That is a distorted view of things. We evolved as humans to pay much more attention to the problems than to the good things in our life. So, 70% our thought are negative, and the majority of thoughts you think today, you thought yesterday. It's not useful. Most thoughts serve no useful purpose – they are not solving problems. They don't make you happier. Just thinking. But it feels very important and true.

With mindfulness, we give ourselves a little distance from our thoughts. We can observe them. And we don't need to believe everything we think. Your thoughts are very real, but they're not necessarily true. We need to learn what thoughts to believe, because our body is always listening. If I think an anxious 'what if this happens' thought - my body already responds. Releases hormones or enzymes, muscles tighten – because it believes the thought. It doesn't know if it's a credible thought or if it's wild thoughts. So with mindfulness we become good guardians of our thoughts. We learn to be less hooked by them. We create spaces for us to be in our body, safe, and in contact with the peaceful conditions that are here right now.

Other practices:

Orla shared that we usually have strong feelings like anxiety, fear or anger and when being still is not appropriate for us, it's so difficult. Therefore, the following mindfulness practices is the the basic practical mindfulness of our daily life.

To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and at one with those around us, and with what we are doing. It is most important to bring our body and mind into harmony while we eat, and walk.

Mindful to eat: we are aware of our colleagues and friends as we serve ourselves, and we should take an amount of food that is good for us. At lunchtime, we can take time as we eat, chewing each mouthful at least 30 times until the food becomes liquefied. Let's enjoy our food and be present with our beloved colleagues at the present moment, eating in such a way that solidity, joy and peace can be possible during the time of eating.

Remember that eating in the silence is to be aware of its nourishment in order to deepen our practice of mindful eating and support the peaceful atmosphere. When we eat, we can be quiet for around twenty minutes, and then start a mindful conversation with our colleagues or our beloved family.

A Mindful way to walk:

Walking meditation is an important motion to help us become more alert to our body. It is wonderful for when you have strong feelings. The following instruction is below:

- Establish yourself with solidity.
- Pour your weight into one leg so that your other foot is doing less and less, and the heel could just rise up off the floor.

- Equalize your weight again.
- Stay with the physical action: pouring your weight, foot rising, stepping and forming your footprint, pouring all your weight, your other foot rising...
- We can use key words to help us focus – “in the here, in the now, solid, free”.

Walking can release tension and can cultivate gratitude for our body or for the weather, for a beautiful tree that we notice, for this peaceful moment. We nourish ourselves in this way.

Walking mindfulness is to help us concentrate on our walking in an area or while healthcare workers walk around the hospital from different wards. When walking, we can test to understand the physical feelings or emotions such as sunlight, cool air. Acknowledging the feeling enable us to stay alert to the environment but don't allow your thoughts to totally try physical sensations

Mindfulness can be mindfulness of anything. Brushing our teeth, chopping vegetables, listening to a co-worker, resting at the end of the day. It's the quality of the kind attention that makes it mindfulness. That is, staying with the non-negotiable information that our body is experiencing – touch, scent, temperature, taste. Over and over again, Over time we can look deeply in to our food. This is the notion of monotasking.

Nourishing joy and happiness:

The World Health Organisation defines health as not simply the absence of illness but the presence of wellness. There's been some great research over the last decade about wellbeing and what helps us to feel good in our life.

Orla expressed that when we are suffering, we need to nourish our joy, therefore, having a strong sense of happiness is well being. The short practice is to nourish our happiness and to strengthen our powerful thoughts.

Find a memory that comes up with one of these words: happiness, joy, ease, excitement, satisfaction, surprise, gratitude, connection, laughing, wonder or awe.

Embody the memory and see how your face feels, your throat, your upper chest, your heart, etc. Expand our awareness through the whole body and then take a moment to know or recognize this is what it feels like feel to wonder.

We need to deliberately nourish our happiness every day. Otherwise our wellbeing is in danger, even if we're not sick or suffering. We nourish every day to strengthen our heart, and then when we suffer, we have a stronger heart to take care of ourselves.

Self-compassion:

We should know how to take care of ourselves when we're suffering. We feel different types of suffering: anxiety, fear, anger, frustration, grief or powerlessness.

Orla also shared her experiences in nourishment that “when things are difficult for me, I offer myself compassion, I noticed that I am suffering, therefore, I stop for a moment because my mind keeps thinking about suffering. I don't engage these thoughts, so that it is not easy to be afraid or to be angry. I would come back my body and offer myself kindness: may I be safe and happy, may I be free from all harm, may I move to each moment with grace or ease. It's the ability to

care for myself that becomes a habit, then it becomes familiar, and it turns into a trait and I become a self-caring person”.

Mindfulness helps us not only to get in touch with suffering, so that we can embrace and transform it, but also to touch the wonders of life, including our own body.

When we practice mindful breathing or walking, we bring our mind come back to our body and we are established in the here and now. We feel so lucky because we have so many conditions or opportunities of happiness that are already available. Joy and happiness will come.

Sharing and Reflection:

After listening to Orla introduce and guide the basic practice of mindfulness, Dr Duong Duy Khoa shared his opinions on the benefits of practicing mindfulness.

Mindfulness helps Health Care Workers (HCWs)

- to release their stress and engagement with the emotions of the suffering of patients;
- be open-minded to share the sadness or sorrows and grief of their own emotions because HCWs are the ones who take care of others and they try to show their strong emotions or be positive when they are the ones who work under pressure in their working environment.
- be respectful with their own emotions and the emotions of others.
- improve the deep listening and understand the pain of patients; and develop better empathy with patients.
- Support HCWs to develop their own well-being.
- Develop the mindfulness practice for patients to overcome their pain or suffering and support their psychological development.

He also shared tips for HCWs wanting to practice mindfulness:

When doctors do check- ups for patients, doctors can say: “I am preparing to take care of patients, this is an important person”. This is a way to be fully present for their patients.

When doctors wash their hands before checking patients, be aware of washing hands and of your in and out breath for about 30 seconds and you will have peace of mind. This is very important to practice mindful breathing because this will stop you thinking for a while and stop the development of strong emotions, letting go of the concentration in our mind. By doing this activity, we can create the habit of happiness.

****To view the recording of the online webinar go to: <https://kynangnhanvienyte.org/hoi-thao-online-giup-nhan-vien-y-te-vuot-qua-nhung-ap-luc-tinh-than-trong-mua-dich-covid-19/> (N.b. The workshop is predominately in Vietnamese language).**

MINDFULNESS PRACTICES GUIDED BY ORLA:

1. Superfood Start Morning Meditation: http://insig.ht/gm_71404
2. Short break in a busy day: http://insig.ht/gm_71406
3. Deep Relaxation: http://insig.ht/gm_86874
4. Mindful Walking: http://insig.ht/gm_64840
5. Resting in the sense of a smile: http://insig.ht/gm_45858
6. Chocolate meditation: http://insig.ht/gm_93680
7. Loving-kindness: http://insig.ht/gm_127098