



Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center

Women Veterans Newsletter, Spring 2020

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These are difficult times of uncertainty that are challenging our skills for coping, adaptation and change. The current pandemic is a strain on the emotional resources and mental health of many people. Fear of illness, social isolation, financial insecurity is a common experience and add to the unpredictability of COVID 19. This crisis raises concerns that can affect women in a unique manner. The current situation may increase the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence and lack of childcare resources may place undue strain on parenting. Women that are expecting may feel particularly vulnerable and concerned about how COVID 19 may affect their pregnancy and delivery. Survivors of trauma may experience a resurgence of post-traumatic responses. Many caregivers are women and might feel emotionally depleted and socially isolated by the responsibilities of providing care while meeting requirements of social distancing.

We are mindful of the stress this crisis may pose and remain steadfast in our commitment to care for women veterans. We offer virtual appointments and identified resources to empower you to practice self-care. We encourage you to reach out to your provider should the need arise and use online resources to help you maintain a Whole Health approach. In this newsletter, we suggest helpful tips to get you through this time, address some of your questions about your VA healthcare and provide a list of available resources to support you and your family.

While we practice recommendations for social distancing, it is important to maintain our connection to others. It is key to our mental health. Together, we can emerge from this crisis with a sense of hope for our future.

CDC Guidance: How to Stay Safe

- Staying at home is the best way to prevent illness and exposure to this virus
 - Practice social distancing and allow at least 6 feet of distance between yourself and others. Remember that people that are not showing symptoms may be able to spread the virus.
 - Avoid close contact with people that are sick.
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
 - Cover coughs and sneezes
 - Cover your mouth and nose with cloth face mask in public even if you don't feel sick
 - Disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily
- ✚ **CDC recommendations frequently change, see this link for updates:**
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fprevention.html

Lovell FHCC Update on COVID-19

Patients who feel they may have been exposed and have symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath) should call their Primary Care Provider for guidance **before** arriving at the FHCC.

- ✚ After hours, if you have symptoms or just have questions, call the Nurse Advice Line at 224-610-2920.
- ✚ For other concerns, you may be able to access Lovell FHCC care from home by phone or using VA Virtual Care options.
- ✚ Please see FHCC website for latest information: <https://www.lovell.fhcc.va.gov/index.asp>

Update on Gynecology Services

- We are not doing any routine screening / annual exams / well woman visits currently.
- Abnormal Pap evaluation can wait 3 to 12 months depending on the severity.
- Many gynecologic problems can be initially evaluated over the phone. We can even start treatment while awaiting formal face to face consult.
- Patients do not need to come in for birth control. We can counsel over the phone and send prescriptions through mail order. IUDs, injections, and implants will have to wait until after the pandemic.
- No elective surgeries are being scheduled at this time.

Discover What Matters

By Cynthia Gunnarson, MSN, Whole Health Program Manager

So much of our daily living has changed while learning new ways of dealing with COVID-19 and the unknowns – how long the pandemic will last, facing financial issues, finding ways to care for family members, and the effects of physical distancing and loneliness while being in quarantine – can be overwhelming. The strains of stress and upended daily routines during the pandemic can provoke anxiety and stress, worsen pre-existing mental health and insomnia problems, or contribute to new ones. These stressors can take the form of a racing mind, making it impossible to relax and get a good night's sleep.



A good night's sleep is important: sleep helps us retain information and perform better on memory tasks. Long periods of sleep are necessary to boost our immune functions – including our response to stress, improve our mood, and to help us to feel and look our best.

The practice of mindfulness can help with relaxation (including ability to sleep), improves focus and the ability to process grief. Rather than dwelling in the past or projecting into the future, mindfulness is the practice of becoming more fully aware of the present moment – non-judgmentally and completely. The practice involves a

keen awareness of sensory stimuli (really noticing your breathing, feeling the sensations of your body) and “being in the now.”

Especially now, learning to practice mindfulness can increase your awareness of thoughts and feelings. FHCC’s Whole Health approach incorporates self-care techniques, including mindfulness, to empower, equip, and treat to take charge of your health and well-being, and live life to the fullest.

To learn more about this practice and its benefits, watch “What is Mindfulness.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbGe9BpniJo>.

Get started on your Whole Health journey – complete your Personal Health Inventory (PHI);

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/> is a great place to find out more.

Now more than ever the importance of self-care cannot be understated. Find several self-care resources that are particularly relevant in these remote times at :

https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/features/Take_Whole_Health_With_You.asp.

Phone-based Mindful Meditation Classes are currently offered to veterans. Take any or all classes. No registration required. Dates: Every Friday afternoon, April – June 2020. Time: 10am-11am. Call toll free number: 1-800-767-1750, Access Code 54220#. For more information call: Debbie-Skeete-Bernard at 1-973-676-1000, extension 2714.

Mental Health Wellness Tips for Quarantine

1. Pace yourself. Monitor yourself for fatigue, irritability, poor focus, marked anxiety, or other signs that you may be feeling stressed or overwhelmed. It’s natural to have these feelings right now, but it can also be a sign that you need to slow down, simplify, or take a break. If we run on empty, we can’t care for ourselves, our loved ones, or our communities.
2. Stay hydrated and eat well. This one may seem obvious, but stress and eating often don’t mix well, and we find ourselves over-indulging, forgetting to eat, and avoiding food.
3. Stick to a routine. Go to sleep and wake up at a reasonable time, write a schedule that is varied and includes time for work as well as self-care.
4. Limit social media and COVID conversation, especially around children. Find a few trusted sources that you can check in with consistently, limit it to a few times a day, and set a time limit for yourself.
5. Find something you can control. In moments of uncertainty, control your little corner of the world. Organize your bookshelf, purge your closet, put together that furniture. It helps to anchor and ground us when the bigger things are chaotic.
6. Develop a self-care toolkit. This can look different for everyone. A lot of successful self-care strategies involve a sensory component (seven senses: touch, taste, sight, hearing, smell). Some ideas include comforting music, mint tea, lavender or eucalyptus oil, taking a bath, a journal, an inspirational book.
7. Expect behavioral issues in children and respond gently. We are all struggling with disruption in routine, none more than children, who rely on routines constructed by others to make them feel safe and to know what comes next.
8. Flexibility is key. Increased stress, social distancing, and other unique stressors test our flexibility and adaptability. It’s okay to be uncertain or feel a bit lost in these kinds of situations – ask for support, evaluate your realistic options, modify your expectations, and move forward.

9. Be kind to yourself. Remind yourself that you are doing as much as you can. Ask yourself what gives you joy and meaning and increase the amount of time you spend doing those activities.
10. Above all, remember which stress management strategies have worked for you in the past as you survived and overcame other challenges. Draw on those strategies to get through this challenging time. Remind yourself that you are resilient!

Things to do with your Family during the time of Quarantine

1. Bake bread, experiment with baking breads like sour dough, rye bread, naan bread and pumpernickel bread. It is a great stress reliever and fun family activity.
2. As the weather warms up it is a perfect time to grow a vegetable garden, plant a variety of vegetables with your children including tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, zucchini and herbs.
3. Start learning to cook a new cuisine, some to pick from:
 - South Indian
 - Ethiopian
 - Nepali
 - South American



Suggestions on how to Talk to your Children about COVID 19

1. Use words that your child can understand depending on their age and developmental level. Provide the necessary amount of information for them to get a sense of what is going on. You do not need to provide complicated details; a simple explanation is enough especially for young children.
2. School aged children will ask more questions about why things are different. Be honest with them to avoid confusion and talk to them in terms they can understand. You can help young children feel safe and secure by maintaining a daily routine. Hugs and kisses help too!
3. Explain that we need to do things to stay healthy and prevent ourselves and others from getting sick. Teach them to practice proper hygiene by washing their hands and covering coughs and sneezes.
4. Provide reassurance that you are doing your best to keep your family healthy and if anyone gets sick, they will get the medical care they need.
5. Talk to your children in a calm way. They can pick up on your feelings and will follow your lead.

Pregnancy during the Pandemic:

What to do if a Loved One can't be with you during Labor and Delivery

During the pandemic, we've all had to adopt "social distancing" to protect ourselves and our communities. This creates unique challenges when you're pregnant. In addition to doing what you can to safeguard your own health and that of your baby, you may be in the unexpected situation of having to go through labor and delivery without a loved one being present, or not having family be able to visit you when the baby is born. Your access to prenatal care, childbirth preparation classes and your chosen delivery hospital may have changed. This time

might be especially challenging if you're also faced with other stresses, mental health concerns or reminders of difficult past experiences. If this happens, here are some ideas about how to manage the stress:

Reach out to VA resources for information and support

- Jessica Teachout, RN, Maternity Care Coordinator at 224-610-7615
- Sarah Bognanno MSW, LCSW, Women's Health Primary Care Social Worker at 224-610-7603
- Dr. Irma A. Sharp, PhD, LCSW, Women Veterans Program Manager at 224-610-1123

Find ways to communicate

- Keep in close touch with your VA Maternity Care Coordinator. She can help you navigate changes in the health care environment.
- To reach your VA providers, you can use Secure Messaging in [MyHealththeVet](#). You can also request phone or video visits with your VA providers.
- If your non-VA providers (for example, obstetrician or midwife) have secure email services, consider signing up so you can get messages and questions to them quickly.
- Reach out to loved ones for video chats on a smartphone or tablet that you can bring with you to a labor and delivery room.

Consider online or phone-based resources, such as [VA Mindfulness Coach phone app](#)

Plan ahead

- Pack in advance what you'll need to bring with you during labor and delivery. Remember to pack a charger for your phone or tablet.
- Identify things that will help you to relax, and plan to bring them with you. Here are some examples:
 - Pictures of loved ones, including pets
 - Favorite music or soothing sounds
 - Post-its or notecards with encouraging statements
- Be aware of what may cause you the most distress during labor or postpartum and find out your options ahead of time. Here are some examples:
 - If you're concerned about pain, or being drowsy or immobile because of pain medications, ask about options
 - If it upsets you to lie on your back, ask if you can deliver in another position, such as squatting
 - If you sometimes take "as needed" anti-anxiety medication, ask if it's okay to take it during labor
 - If you're wondering about the safety of breastfeeding or have concerns about caring for the baby, choose a pediatrician and ask questions before your baby is born.
- Consider writing down requests and preferences to share with hospital staff when you arrive

Use strategies during labor

- Let providers know when you're feeling upset and ask for help
- Take slow breaths in and short, firm breaths out
- Imagine a relaxing or happy scene; focus your attention on it
- Scan your body for muscles that are tensed; squeeze them tightly for a few seconds, then let go to release the tension
- Repeat phrases (aloud or to yourself) that help you feel confident and supported (e.g., "One contraction at a time," "I can do this")

It's normal to feel anxious about the current situation and to experience feelings of loss and grief about disruptions to your plans. Though your experience may be different than what you had hoped or planned, you can get through it and your providers are here to help.

Source: VA Women's Mental Health, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Stay Connected



Emotional support and fun, meaningful connection with others are vital to health and well-being. The more isolated and alone we feel, the more likely it is that our mental health will be negatively affected. This is likely to be particularly true during this time, and so it's important to find opportunities to connect even while social distancing.

- ❖ With family and friends: Call, Facetime, Zoom, Skype, or try Google Hangouts to reduce your isolation. Be creative – have a meal with a friend over Facetime, watch a movie “together”, or exchange photos throughout the day with a loved one to share what each of you are up to.

- ❖ With VA: The VA will continue to be here to support you, with options for telehealth appointments and contact over the phone. If you need help accessing MST-related services at Lovell, contact Delia De Avila, LCSW, MST Coordinator at 224-610-5843. Below are mental health resources offered through Women's Health Primary Care Clinic:

- Women's Stress Management group through VA Video Connect on Mondays at 3pm. Please contact Dr. Brenda Danielson, Psy.D. at 224-610-7537 or Sara Bognanno, LCSW at 224-610-7603.
- LGBT Pride and Service Group through VA Video Connect. Please contact Dr Brenda Danielson, Psy.D. at 224-610-7537 for more information.

- ❖ With counselors in the community: Resources for trauma survivors are also available in the community:

- National Sexual Assault Hotline: This free and confidential support hotline is available 24/7 for sexual assault survivors and their loved ones. Call 1-800-656-4673 (HOPE) or chat online with a counselor at hotline.rainn.org.

- Anti-Violence Project: This organization offers free, bilingual crisis intervention and support 24/7 for LGBTQ+ survivors of any type of violence. Call 212-714-1141.

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Disaster Distress Helpline: This national hotline provides immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any disaster. Available in multiple languages, 24/7. Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.

❖ With others recovering from difficulties with alcohol or substance use: Many Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings are available online and by phone.

o NA: Online meetings are available at www.neveraloneclub.org; a list of telephone meetings is available at www.nabyphone.com or by calling 559-546-1400, 425-535-9142 or 716-293-9799.

o AA: AA meetings are available online and by phone. Visit aa-intergroup.org/directory.php or www.aameetingonline.com/ for offerings.

Stay Safe

During stressful times, feelings of isolation and helplessness can increase, and some people struggle with thoughts of suicide or self-harm. Stress can also lead to relationship conflict or increased risk of harm from others. If you are feeling unsafe for whatever reason, please reach out to these resources:

❖ Veterans Crisis Line: The Veterans Crisis Line connects Veterans in crisis and their families and friends with caring, qualified VA responders. Veterans and their loved ones can call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1, send a text to 838255, or chat online at www.veteranscrisisline.net.

❖ National Domestic Violence Hotline: This is a free and confidential national service available 24/7 to assist those experiencing intimate partner violence in connecting with resources and support. Call 1-800-799-7233. If you're unable to speak safely, you can log onto thehotline.org to chat, or text LOVEIS to 22522.

❖ myPlan: This online tool, which can be accessed from www.myplanapp.org or through phone app stores, can help with safety decisions and resources if you or someone you care about is experiencing abuse in an intimate relationship.

❖ National Sexual Assault Hotline: Call 1-800-656-4673 (HOPE) or visit hotline.rainn.org for assistance finding resources to help after sexual assault.

Online and Telephone Support Groups for Caregivers:

Family Caregiver Alliance online support groups <https://www.caregiver.org/support-groups>

Smart Patients Caregivers Community, part of the Family Caregiver Alliance (online— listed by diagnosis) <https://www.smartpatients.com/partners/fca>

Well Spouse Association, has free forums as well as other services that involve a fee. Military Spousal Caregivers have some fees waived. <https://wellspouse.org/2009-wsa-in-the-news/military-spousal-caregivers.html>

ALZConnected Alzheimer's Association message boards https://www.alzconnected.org/?_ga=2.221163994.391459608.1584111684-1428305785.1584111684

CancerCare online and telephone support groups moderated by MSWs: https://www.cancercare.org/support_groups

CaringBridge Online Journal for Health Care Journeys <https://www.caringbridge.org/>

AARP Caregiving Community Message Boards <https://community.aarp.org/t5/Caregiving/Welcome-to-the-AARP-Caregiving-Community/m-p/1786782#M3126>

Partial list of support groups for caregivers on Facebook: <https://dailycaring.com/support-groups-for-caregivers-on-facebook/>

Economic Assistance Resources during COVID-19

Wisconsin:

- <https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/toughtimes/>

Illinois:

- <https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/coronavirus/Resources/Pages/EconomicAssistance.aspx>
- <https://housingactionil.org/what-we-do/public-education-organizing/covid-19-information-resources/#mortgage-assist>

Wounded Warrior Project:

For veterans that are in urgent financial need due to loss of income caused by COVID-19. See following link for information:

<https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/covid-relief>

Food Assistance:

If you need food assistance, you will be able to place an order from My Pantry Express up until three business days before your selected pick-up date. Please visit following website for instructions on how to participate and order your needed groceries: www.mypantryexpress.org

Housing Support:

Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) for veterans in Lake, McHenry counties in IL or Kenosha county in WI. Here is a link to their website:

<https://www.tlsveterans.org/programs/housing-support-2/>

Walk in Center for Homeless Veterans:

Lovell FHCC Walk in Center for Homeless Veterans: 224-610-1148, Building 133CA