

## **Resources and Supports for Staff in Long-Term Care**

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### **Myths and Shame: Addressing the Barriers to Mental Wellness**

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Every October, , as we walk through the aisles of our favorite stores where shelves brim with pink breast cancer awareness totes, shirts, phone cases, belts, hats, key chains and more, it's difficult to fathom a time not that long ago when people whispered about cancer—when the “c” word was never discussed in polite conversations and only in hushed tones.

In his book *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, the author Siddhartha Mukherjee shares a fascinating anecdote about the level of shame associated with cancer as recently as the 1950s. When a woman contacted *The New York Times* to place an ad for a breast cancer survivors group, she was informed, “We can't place such an ad because it uses the words ‘breast’ and ‘cancer’” (double whammy!). They suggested that she call it a support group for “diseases of the chest wall.”

Since then, the shame of cancer, which was rooted in fear and denial, has diminished as new research and medicine have enabled health officials to shift the conversation. The public has come to understand that many cancers are indeed treatable if caught early enough.

This new understanding that cancer is no longer an immediate death sentence also owes to educational campaigns encouraging people to focus on early detection and treatment. The American Cancer Society created a legion of volunteers called the Women's Field Army, who were sent out into communities armed with facts to “wage war on cancer.”

Today's “cancer” is mental illness. With a higher prevalence than cancer's, mental illnesses impact one in five Americans, and just as with cancer, much of what keeps people from talking about mental illness is fear and denial. While not a death sentence as cancer was in the early 20th century, a mental illness diagnosis can feel like a death—a dying of hopes and dreams for a productive, happy life. And mental illness, left untreated, can be life-threatening (90% of those who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental health condition at the time of their death).

Today there is reason for hope and excitement. Worldwide scientific research is developing more accurate diagnostic tools and more effective treatments that will increase the success we already see in treating complex brain health issues. Just as with cancer in the mid-20th century, we are poised to end the shame associated with mental illness. Shifting the focus to early intervention and treatment creates the possibility that fewer people will receive treatment at “stage 4” of their illnesses.

Yet even though campaigns to lessen the shame and stigma of mental illness are abundant, people still don't know how to talk about mental health. Because fear is involved, we use dismissive language—language that diminishes the real and often heartbreaking impact of

mental illnesses. We carelessly use words like “crazy” and “nutjob” and rarely use person-first language.

We refer to people’s mental illnesses as if they are stains on their character rather than serious health issues. And we refer to everything from the weather to the economy as “schizophrenic” or “bipolar,” always with a negative connotation implied.

The World Health Organization says that “there is no health without mental health,” but too often the shame associated with mental illness, reinforced by our stigmatizing language, media portrayals, and deeply rooted myths and misconceptions keeps most of us from embracing the importance of mental health and placing value in mental health care. A 2015 study in the journal *Psychological Medicine* showed that the stigma associated with mental illness is still a major barrier to seeking treatment. Researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry at King’s College London examined data from 144 studies, which included over 90,000 participants from across the globe. They found that the stigma of mental illness remains one of the top reasons people choose to forgo care. Much of the stigma may be connected to the the myths and misconceptions of mental illness and can be a barrier to individuals proactively reaching out for help.

### **Myths That Keep Us Silent**

Many mental health myths and misconceptions, deeply rooted in our culture, create the framework with which most Americans approach mental health. Many of these myths reinforce stereotypes and deepen the shame that often keeps people from reaching out for help and from having positive, proactive mental health conversations. Let’s unpack some of the myths that keep us silent:

#### ***Myth: Mental health conditions aren’t common.***

**Fact:** Mental illness is more prevalent than many people think: One in five Americans experiences a mental health condition in their lifetime. One in 25 Americans experiences a serious mental illness in a given year that substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. And, if you’re not the one in five yourself, you’re likely to have a family member, close friend, or colleague who is. Mental health is health that impacts all of us.

#### ***Myth: Psychiatric disorders are not real medical issues.***

**Fact:** Just as heart disease and diabetes, mental illnesses are legitimate medical health issues. Research shows that mental illnesses have genetic and environmental causes, and like other medical conditions, mental illnesses can be treated effectively. The brain is complex, and although science has been slow to catch up, mental illnesses are now recognized as brain-based biological disorders.

#### ***Myth: People with mental health conditions are violent and dangerous.***

**Fact:** Having a mental health condition does not make a person more likely to be violent or dangerous. The truth is, living with a mental health condition makes you more likely to be a victim of violence, four times the rate for the general public. Only 3–5% of violence in the U.S. can be attributed to persons with mental illness. Most cases of violence in those with mental

illness happen in situations in which a person is untreated and is not receiving proper treatment—which is why access to treatment is important.

***Myth: Mental illness is caused by personal weakness.***

**Fact:** Just like any medical illness, mental illness is not the fault of the person who has a mental health condition. It is caused by environmental and biological factors, not personal weakness. A stressful job or home life makes some people more susceptible, as do traumatic life events such as being the victim of a crime. Mental health is not the same as mental strength. Just as people with arthritis can still be physically strong, individuals with depression can be mentally strong.

***Myth: You're just sad, not depressed.***

**Fact:** Depression is not something a person can will away. People often have the misconception that a person can just “cheer up” or “shake it off.” Depression is not just “the blues.” It is a serious medical condition that affects our biological functioning. Only a trained medical professional can determine whether someone is clinically depressed. Anyone experiencing symptoms that interfere with daily life that persist for more than two weeks should schedule a visit with their primary care physician.

***Myth: People with mental illness can't handle work or school.***

**Fact:** Stressful situations can be difficult for all people, not just those who live with mental illness. People with mental health conditions have jobs, go to school, and are active and successful members of their communities. Studies have shown that they often hold jobs of high status and are as productive and reliable as their peers.

***Myth: People are “faking it” or doing it for attention.***

**Fact:** No one would choose to have a mental illness, just as no one would choose to have a physical illness. The causes for mental health conditions are intensively studied, and they are real. For anyone living with a mental health condition, their specific symptoms may not always be visible to an untrained observer. It can be challenging to understand what people with mental health conditions are going through, but that doesn't mean that their condition isn't real.

***Myth: You can never get better from a mental illness.***

**Fact:** Mental health issues are not always lifelong disorders, and treatment success rates are comparable to those for other health issues. Innovations in medicine and therapy have made recovery a reality for people living with mental health issues, even chronic conditions. While all symptoms may not be alleviated easily or at all, with the right recovery plan, people can live the productive and healthy lives they've always imagined. As with all health issues, the earlier that people access the right treatment and care, the better their outcomes.

***Myth: You can prevent mental illness.***

**Fact:** Mental health issues usually come about as a result of biological and environmental factors. For this reason, there is no definitive way to prevent a mental illness. However, you can establish healthy habits like a healthy diet, adequate sleep, proactive stress management, and exercise so that you can more effectively control symptoms. Likewise, you can educate yourself on mental health so that, should a disorder arise, you can get treatment as soon as possible.

***Myth: If you feel better, you are cured.***

**Fact:** When most people get on the proper treatment plan, they will feel much better. Many symptoms may be diminished or eradicated, but this does not necessarily mean that a person is “cured.” The relief that one feels is thanks to the treatment plan. To sustain good mental health, one may need to continue treatment even when one feels better. Symptoms of a mental health condition can come and go. Environmental factors can often influence how a person feels. Also there may simply be times when a person will exhibit symptoms more strongly.

***Myth: Mental illness isn't a life-threatening condition.***

**Fact:** We tend to think of other health issues, such as cancer, as life threatening, but few people recognize the life-threatening aspect of untreated mental health issues. It is estimated that untreated, undiagnosed, or undertreated mental illness is the underlying cause of about 90% of suicides. Suicide rates have been rising, with a 30% increase in the last 16 years, and suicide is the 10th leading cause of death of adults and the 2nd leading cause of death in young people ages 15–24. Ensuring that people can talk openly and proactively about their mental health and have access to treatment can save lives.

***Myth: You can't help someone with mental illness.***

**Fact:** Every person can be a source of help and hope for those living with mental illness, by speaking and acting in a way that dispels myths and encourages people to talk more openly and positively about their mental health. When you help actively and recognize and work toward changing the stigma of mental health, you are ensuring that fear and shame no longer become barriers to seeking help. Three easy ways to do this are:

- **Treat mental health like physical health.** Respond to mental health with the same concern, compassion, and outreach as you would for any physical health issue.
- **Share what you've learned.** Ensure that the people in your life aren't relying on myths to reinforce shaming behavior that can keep people from getting help.
- **Start a mental health conversation.** If you've noticed signs of a potential mental health issue in someone you know, love, or care about, start a conversation. People are often reluctant to talk about mental health, but you can create the space for a potentially life-changing and life-saving conversation!

### **Creating Space for Mental Health**

It's not uncommon for me to be approached by people who say, “I've been worried about a friend (or family member). I know I need to say something, but I don't know how to talk about this.” We don't know *how* to talk about mental health, so we don't. Transforming the way people talk about and address mental health requires each of us to create safe, supportive spaces for positive, proactive conversations. This may seem oversimplified, but we can diminish the shame that keeps people from talking about mental health by talking about mental health with them! The following is some guidance on how to have what can be an awkward, but important and life-saving, conversation.

### ***First, know the warning signs***

While a list of warning signs is helpful, often the best advice is to trust your gut. If you have someone in your life whom you know, love, or care about, you can usually tell when something is “off.” And, being in a funk for a few days is normal, but a doctor’s visit is a good idea when symptoms persist and impact someone’s daily functioning.

Common signs of a mental health issue in adults and adolescents can include the following:

- Excessive worrying or fear
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable “highs” or feelings of euphoria
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger
- Avoiding friends and social activities
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or lack of appetite
- Changes in sex drive
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist in objective reality)
- Inability to perceive changes in one’s own feelings, behavior, or personality (“lack of insight”)
- Overuse of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing “aches and pains”)
- Thinking about suicide
- Inability to carry out daily activities or handle daily problems and stress
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance

### ***Then, start talking!***

If you’ve noticed some of the signs and are ready to have a conversation, here are a few things to consider:

- Get familiar with the mental health resources in your community before you start the conversation.
- Find a comfortable space to address your concerns and give yourself ample time for the conversation. It’s best not to feel rushed.
- Ask questions in a time and place where the person feels comfortable. This should be a neutral location, away from other family, friends, or co-workers.
- You are there as a friend (or family member), not a mental health expert. It’s okay to not know what to say or do next.
- By asking someone if they are okay, you are not making their wellbeing your sole responsibility. But you may be able to help them get the help they need.
- Remember to normalize mental health. These are common, prevalent, treatable health issues, not character flaws or personal weakness.

Now it's time to ask questions and listen. Often, people experiencing the onset of a mental health issue feel completely alone. You are creating space to actively listen (nonjudgmentally!) and look for opportunities to share mental health facts and dispel myths you've learned about. Doing this helps to diminish the deeply rooted and prevalent shame of mental health. Don't come into the conversation armed with answers and solutions. Rely on questions that allow you to learn more about the person's current situation. It's important to use "I" language when possible, as this helps lessen any sense of judgment. Here are some questions you can try:

- I've noticed that you're [sleeping more, eating less, etc.]. Is everything okay?
- It seems like you're going through a difficult time. How can I help you?
- I care about you and want to listen. What do you want to share about how you're feeling?
- Who or what has helped you in the past?
- I noticed you seem [hopeless, desperate]. Sometimes people think of suicide when they feel this way. Are you?
- I can help connect you to a counselor or community resource that can help. You don't have to do this alone. What's the best way for me to help you?

Depending on what you learn in this conversation, you should follow up and offer additional support or resources as needed. The simple act of "checking in" with a text or call can be incredibly beneficial. While people often require medication and therapy, they also need engagement and support to fully recover.

The idea that creating space for mental health conversations can be transformative may seem a bit of a stretch. But, like the American Cancer Society in the early 20th century, we can form our own army, armed with facts, to "wage a war" on the shame, fear, and denial that keep 56% of adults from accessing mental health treatment that could be not only life-saving but also life-making.

### ***Know the Resources***

**Local Mental Health (Behavioral Health) Authorities (LMHA/LBHA):** Local mental health authorities provide community mental health services and are also referred to as community mental health centers. They usually cover a specific geographic area, and every county is connected to one. Most LMHAs feature a 24/7 helpline, usually staffed by trained social workers, who can help make referrals and/or connections to local resources.

**Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) is a national network of local crisis centers that provide free, confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**Crisis Text Line:** Crisis Text Line is free 24/7 support for those in crisis. You can text 741-741 from anywhere in the United States to text with a trained Crisis Counselor. Crisis Text Line trains volunteers to support people in crisis.

**NAMI:** The NAMI HelpLine is a free nationwide peer-support service that provides information, resource referrals, and support to people living with a mental health conditions, their family members and caregivers, mental health providers, and the public. The NAMI HelpLine can be reached Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.–6 p.m. at 1-800-950-NAMI (6264).

## **Changing the Mental Health Conversation Begins with You: Addressing Chronic Stress**

We're often much better at recognizing other's needs as opposed to our own (especially if we work in the health field), but if we really want to transform how our community addresses mental health, we have to start by addressing our own mental health needs.

It's important to recognize that chronic stress can trigger mental health issues, and we are all vulnerable regardless of how resilient we are. One way to ensure that you're staying mentally healthy is to actively focus on managing your stress. Managing stress requires change, and that is both good news and bad news. The bad news is that we have to change, and most of us don't like change. The good news is that we *can* change, which can be incredibly empowering!

As you look through the list of strategies below, consider picking two or three that resonate with you and make a commitment to using them for the next 30 days.

### ***Keep the following in mind:***

- It's important to extend as much empathy, kindness, and grace to yourself as you possibly can. You are navigating difficult and challenging situations. You may not always be the best version of yourself, but none of us is.
- Consider focusing on just one or two strategies at most. Otherwise, you'll find yourself overwhelmed and shut down.
- Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no perfect solution to managing it. What works for you may not work for a colleague.
- No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so it's good to explore different strategies and discover which may work best for you.
- Often you won't be able to change or control the situations that are causing you stress, but you always have control over how you respond. Most of the strategies focus on changing the way you respond to situations.

### ***Strategies for Managing Stress***

- Manage your news and social media consumption.** A 24/7 news cycle and the widespread use of social media means that many people are on their electronic devices throughout the day and night, rarely taking a break from the sometimes stressful combination of news and the sometimes negative underlying messages and interactions on social media. Consider going on a social media or news "diet," especially if you find yourself negatively impacted. Commit to limiting how much media you consume to a certain amount of time and/or a certain time of day.
- Look at the big picture.** It's easy to get stuck when you're in the middle of a stressful situation. So, take perspective on the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
- Schedule your worrying.** In the midst of a pandemic and a highly polarized political climate, many people are finding themselves constantly worrying throughout the day. Consider scheduling a time of day to worry. Write down your concerns on a piece of paper. Put the paper in a jar or box as a way to ritualize "putting them out

of mind.” Doing this at bedtime may help you sleep better, or starting your morning with this ritual may help you feel less stressed throughout the day.

- ❑ **Adjust your standards.** Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with “good enough.”
- ❑ **Avoid people who stress you out.** If someone causes stress in your life and you can’t turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely. If this person is someone you cannot avoid, consider how to set boundaries to avoid unnecessary interaction or utilize one of the other strategies to help lessen the stress.
- ❑ **Shorten your “to-do” list.** If you have a long to-do list that overwhelms you, consider shortening the list. Better yet, consider sharing your list with your family or colleagues. Are there things on your list that someone else can help with? Are there items on your to-do list that are not urgent or don’t really need to happen? Do you have several to-do lists that could be consolidated into one list? Ideally, lists should help minimize your stress levels. If you find that they are making you feel more stressed, you may want to reconsider how you’re using your to-do list.
- ❑ **Don’t try to control the uncontrollable.** Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- ❑ **Learn to forgive.** Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on, and make sure to forgive yourself. We’re often much harder on ourselves than others are. We are much better at forgiving others when we are kind, gentle, and forgiving of ourselves.
- ❑ **Set aside time to “be.”** We often forget that we are human beings, not human “doings.” We benefit from a certain amount of down time in which we have nothing planned. Make sure you’re taking time to do nothing. A break of responsibilities and a to-do list can recharge your battery and lessen your stress level.
- ❑ **Express your feelings instead of bottling them up.** If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you don’t voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same. It’s important to recognize that our family and friends are not therapists. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by some of the feelings you’re having, it may be time to consider seeing a therapist. Therapeutic relationships can be transformative in helping you navigate stressful relationships and situations.
- ❑ **Connect with others.** We’re “hard-wired” for connection. Spending time with positive people who enhance your life ensures you have a strong support system that can help mitigate the impact of stress. Even when you are required to maintain physical distance, you can still look for ways to connect socially by utilizing technology and the outdoors.

- ❑ **Do something you enjoy every day.** Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it's reading a book, listening to a podcast, cuddling with a pet (don't underestimate the power of fur therapy!), or crafting.
- ❑ **Maintain a healthy lifestyle.** You can increase your resilience and manage your stress better by taking good care of your physical body. Regular activity, a healthy diet, and adequate sleep ensure that we are the best version of ourselves when we're navigating stressful situations. When we're feeling particularly stressed, we underestimate the importance of addressing our most basic needs. We overeat. We stay up late worrying, and we binge watch our favorite shows. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, even when we're stressed, ensures that we have the energy we need to navigate challenging times.

### **One Life-Changing Practice: Controlled Breathing**

While strategies can be helpful for managing stress and building resilience, there is one practice that can be life-changing as we strive to take good care of our mental health.

When you're stressed, your body experiences increased heart rate, fast breathing, and high blood pressure, which take a toll on your body and mind. The next time you are relaxed or about to fall asleep, pay attention to your breathing and how your body feels. Using controlled breathing exercises can help you experience this level of relaxation even in moments of stress. Controlled breathing is one of the best ways to lower stress in the body and help you "reset."

When you breathe deeply, it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax. The brain then sends this message to your body. Your heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure all decrease as you breathe deeply, and this helps relieve stress. The good news is that breathing exercises are easy to learn. You can do them whenever you want, and you don't need any special tools or equipment to do them.

Below are two simple breath exercises to try. You can discover many more online (including videos), and you may want to consider introducing them to your partner, spouse, or children as well so that you can encourage each other to use them when needed.

#### ***Belly breathing***

1. Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position.
2. Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.
3. Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move.
4. Breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Feel the hand on your belly go in, and use it to push all the air out.
5. Do this breathing 3 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.
6. Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

#### ***Five-Finger Breathing***

1. Place the index finger of one hand on the outside of the pinky finger on your other hand. As you breathe in, trace up to the tip of your pinky, and as you breathe out, trace down the inside of your pinky.

2. On your next inhale, trace up the outside of your ring finger, and on the exhale, trace down the inside of your ring finger.
3. Inhale and trace up the outside of your middle finger; exhale and trace down the inside of your middle finger.
4. Continue finger by finger until you've traced your entire hand.
5. Reverse the process and trace from your thumb back to your pinky.

As the researcher Brene Brown reminds us, "We are hard-wired for connection." The biggest difference we can make in changing the mental health conversation is to form our own "army" of people committed to creating the space for the people in our lives (family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, strangers on the bus) to talk more openly and positively about a public health issue that impacts us all and to arm ourselves with the information, resources, and tools to ensure that we are no longer ashamed and understand that mental health is health!

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