

Questions

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Can I come into my house through the front door today? If I hug my daughter before taking a shower will I expose her? Can I drink a coffee on shift, or is taking my mask off too much of

a risk? It's a thousand small decisions every day. A thousand chances to get it wrong, to make the wrong decision.

We're emergency physicians. We can deal with stress. EMS just pulled up with CPR in progress? That's fine, no problem. Someone just ran in the front door, saying their child is in the car and isn't breathing? We can deal with it. We can fix it. We have an algorithm for that, training for that. A way to deal with it. Some time in residency, someone taught you a mantra for stress. A post-shift routine. Deep breathing. Some way to deal with acute stress so that it doesn't become overwhelming. Maybe you cry in the car on the way home – but by the time you get there, you feel better.

These are the questions now. Who gets the last bed in the hospital? When I show up for work tomorrow, am I risking my family along with myself? The patient in room 10 is dying from COVID and his family needs to be there, but he isn't allowed visitors. Or he's allowed one, but all of his children want to be here. Do you have to choose? Do you have the right to choose? Ethical decisions we never imagined are a part of our every shift. Or maybe you did imagine choosing, but it was in the safe confines of an ethics class in medical school, not in the middle of a busy shift. Or it was on a humanitarian mission in a foreign country. It wasn't your hometown with the tent out in front of the hospital with not enough equipment. These situations are now in front of you, on your shift. You don't have answers for yourself or your patients.

“WE'RE EMERGENCY PHYSICIANS. WE CAN DEAL WITH STRESS.”

This is different. It doesn't end when we get home. The questions at work bleed into our lives at home and our dreams at night. Maybe your spouse is worried because school just went virtual again. Maybe your usual method of destressing is to hit up an exercise class at the gym, but cases are rising in your area and classes are canceled. So now what? You're back on shift in 12 hours. So is it another night in front of the TV? Drink another beer, or maybe two? How do we deal with the stress today? Tomorrow? Every day from now until sometime in the future when everything is better?

I'm not writing this because I have the answer. I don't. I don't really think anyone does, or rather I think that we all have to find our own answer. Each decision feels so small, but together it's a mountain and we're constantly under threat of being buried underneath. Cases are rising again.



“ETHICAL DECISIONS WE NEVER IMAGINED ARE A PART OF OUR EVERY SHIFT.”

It's not going away. Some days it feels like hitting a wall, like it's not possible to get out of bed and do it all again. Residency didn't teach me how to deal with this chronic stress, this cloud following me around all day. What we need is a sweeping wind to blow this cloud away. But honestly, I don't think this exists, I know I don't hold it. What I do know is that we all have to find our own wind. For me it's been running and weight lifting. Getting out of my head and into my body. And to be honest, there are days where it doesn't matter how far I run or how much I lift, everything going on right now is too much to deal with. Maybe for you it's getting more practice on your favorite video game, or learning to cook something new. Maybe this is the year you see a therapist. I did. It's okay to need help.

I'm writing this to tell you it's okay to have “pandemic” days. It's okay if you didn't write those papers or learn French or learn how to sew or whatever your plan was in the beginning of the pandemic. It's okay if your entire plan for the next month is to try really hard to show up to work on time and take care of your patients. It's okay if you can't go to work right now and you're taking a break. It's great if yesterday you worked out, cooked a healthy dinner and went to bed early, but today your only accomplishment is eating a bag of chips in bed. It's okay. Or maybe it's not okay.

Maybe it's time to accept that you are not entirely in control of every situation as you were trained to be. To be sad some of the time. Or angry. Or happy one minute and sad the next. To be missing the things you love that



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you're unable to do right now. To not have the answer to all of the thousand questions that need to be answered every time you get out of bed.

So when the questions feel overwhelming, this is my advice. It's okay to be overwhelmed. It's okay to say no. Find a way to cope, and be gentle with yourself when there are days that coping mechanism doesn't work. Our job is really hard right now. Be proud that you showed up to do your

job and have done your best to take care of your patients. You might not have all the answers right now, but you're not alone. And that's okay.

What are your mechanisms for coping? Want to share your story with the EM Community? Follow this link to the AAEM site and tell us what you're doing to make it through this pandemic.

www.aaem.org/get-involved/committees/interest-groups/palliative-care/covid-19-story-submissions

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