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Acting with empathy during COVID-19

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Acting with Empathy During COVID-19

Fear, frustration, panic, anger, confusion ... we have all been dealing with these emotions (and many others) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The amount of media attention, whether social media or news media, keeps these emotions at or near the surface seemingly all the time. Our way of life has been impacted in ways we never anticipated or imagined. As a result of these significant disruptions, it is crucial for all of us to demonstrate empathy in each and every encounter — for our patients, our coworkers and ourselves.

Before sharing insight on acting with empathy for patients, co-workers and yourself, I want to make one thing clear: I am amazed at the courage of our teams. If courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act despite the fear, then how could I use any other term to describe our teams? All over the country, our associates have faced these circumstances with poise and professionalism, and I will always remember that we acted courageously and were leaders in selfless acts, despite the fear and anxiety we are experiencing ourselves.

Maintaining Normalcy for Patients

We previously described empathy as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others without explicit communication." Stated differently, empathy is the willingness to put oneself in another's situation and imagine their physical and emotional needs. How does that apply to our patients now, during the COVID-19 pandemic? It is more crucial than ever that we remain the calm during the storm. For our patients, we can act with empathy by simply being there to serve them ... showing up. The more we can provide a sense of normalcy, the more we ease their fears. Life is disrupted, but we can provide stability. It is important to remember that acknowledging patients' emotions does not need to include matching their emotion. Patients may be frustrated and angry, but we can and must greet them with a sincere smile and a warm "hello." Social distancing does not have to mean emotional disconnection. Social distancing does not have to mean emotional disconnection.

These circumstances do not limit our ability to get better at what we do. We should, and must, continue to practice awareness of our surroundings and see our waiting rooms through the eyes of our patients. Is it clean? Are we welcoming? Our wait times may worsen. Are we providing distractions to switch their mindset to something more positive? Many of our teams recognize the added stress homeschooling may bring, so they have items available for children to allow parents a short break. Our elderly patients have been identified as high risk and can feel especially isolated and lonely. Reassuring them about their care and providing a listening ear can make a world of difference.

We have always encountered patients when they are most vulnerable. The best way to prepare for these emotional and physical needs is by taking a proactive approach. Ask for resources our patients need, be their courageous advocate and continue to be their hero.

Practice Self-Care

It is important to remember that being a hero is exhausting; mentally, emotionally and physically we feel the strain. This makes self-care incredibly important right now. Caring for ourselves enables us to care for our families, our friends, our patients and our coworkers. If you are not at your best, providing an exceptional experience is exceptionally difficult. So, taking extra time to practice self-awareness is critical. Remember to take a break. You may even consider stepping away from news programs or social media. Trust me, it will be there later. Unplugging allows you to rest your mind and emotionally recharge. Here are some more ideas for you to consider:

- Find a new book to read
- Start a new exercise routine (I'm getting into yoga)
- Spring clean the house

- Take time to connect with a friend or family member via phone or FaceTime
- Share the joke of the day

Remember, connecting with others is not just for them, it is important for you, too!

Don't Forget Your Coworkers

Of course, if it is important for you, it is important for your coworkers, too. We are all in this together, so be empathetic to your coworkers' needs. Our colleagues may have some significant issues happening in their personal life. Perhaps their elderly family member has been affected, or maybe they have a family member in quarantine. They may have kids home from school unexpectedly, which is causing stress over their care and education. Being sensitive to the needs they have never shared with you is the essence of empathy.

We also need to have each other's backs. Remind your coworker to take a break. Be a voice of encouragement; celebrate the big accomplishments and the routine. If your coworker is being a steady, calming influence, that is worth mentioning. Just saying "thank you for showing up and working hard" can be the kind of reassurance that gets them through the day.

Final Thoughts

Our roles have always been crucial to healthcare organizations; we protect their financial integrity. Now more than ever, organizations need you and they need us. We are the frontline just as we always have been. Our team sets the tone for these encounters when patients arrive, fearful of the present and for their future. In order to continue to provide care for our communities, we must continue our regular responsibilities, including scheduling, pre-registrations, registrations and collections. We must continue to be 100% accurate in collecting patient and insurance information. We must continue to be the leaders, the difference makers.

One final thought: At some point, this pandemic will be over, and our lives will get back to normal, but our families, friends, coworkers and patients will remember how we responded and treated one another. This is our time to build a legacy of empathy and grace.

Thank you for all you do.

Susan Milligan, CHAM, CRCR, is the patient experience director for Ensemble Health Partners. Informed by her experiences in healthcare and as the mother of a child with Down syndrome, she is passionate about helping healthcare organizations improve their patient experience through empathy, empowerment and

