

# Dealing with Chronic Stress and Burnout – a Focus on Healthcare Workers

We have all seen the tip sheets and guides on how to recognise signs of stress in ourselves and the warning signs of when we might be on a more dangerous path to burnout. And, then there are other lists of dos and don'ts to address chronic overwhelm pitched at general employees everywhere. They're helpful and have merit no doubt. But, they fall short of recognising the context of frontline health roles in some key regards.

The same could be said for some retail and hospitality roles too. But today, we're focusing on health workers primarily. The tips and guides just don't seem to fit these highly reactive and pressured work-worlds where working from home is rarely an option: you just have to front up, each and every work day... or night.



While family and friends of health workers lament that there is nothing new to watch on Netflix or Stan (because they have watched everything at least once during the pandemic already!), frontline health workers struggle to watch a full series of anything little lone digest whole slabs of content on the big streaming platforms. They've been at work, non-stop for the past 3 years and missed the whole working-from-home experience that has become part of the new-normal for so many.



## SO WHAT ELSE IS A CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS DYNAMIC FOR HEALTH WORKERS THAT MAKES IT EVEN TOUGHER?

It is difficult for healthcare workers to stay optimistic during such a challenging time and this is made more difficult by the ongoing negative narrative about the current work environment that healthcare workers currently have to navigate. Reinforcement in news media, that is amplified on social media, leaves little space for optimism or hope for health workers wanting to believe in a better tomorrow. But there are options. And they can make a big difference.

How can healthcare workers reconnect with the great aspects of the careers they've sacrificed so much for and fought hard to create? So, let's cherry pick the best of advice, based on science and that we know works, but tweak it a bit, to better suit the work context of frontline health workers. We are not going to focus on a big list but 3 key areas or steps you could reconnect with and make happen.

## 3 STEP PLAN WITH OPTIONAL EXTRAS



### Step 1

A simple but potent thing to do, is to develop the art of creating micro-moments that recharge your batteries quickly, within your daily routine. It's not easy or realistic for a frontline nurse or surgical registrar in ED to respond to a scheduled breathing meditation when they are urgently prescribing or charting time-critical medication. For the personal care worker in an aged care facility that is run off their feet, the gratitude journal will have to wait.



## FIND OUT MORE

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Use breaks, planned or opportunistic, more intentionally to recharge. The biggest tip, be highly selective about who you talk to and what you look at on your phone. Don't invite more negativity into your day. Better still, don't look at your phone and do something intentionally uplifting and recharging. Don't waste your break with your Instagram feed (it can wait), find a breathing meditation, some calming music, read a short story that inspires, read 6 pages of your favourite new book. Just shut your eyes in the sunshine and think about things you're grateful for in your life. Plan a special meal for someone you haven't seen for a while and begin to make it happen. Do things that immediately gratify or are about creating a great experience in the near future.

Summary, be opportunistic and prioritise some time to intentionally reset and recharge.



### Step 2

Steps 2 and 3 are bigger plays and require more sustained focus and discipline. Largely, they are focused on activities within and outside of work.

Create an inspiring "third space". This is a conscious act of creating a space for yourself where you recharge, feel inspired and know gives you greater balance. It needs to be regular and right for you. Now, what 'it' is will vary dramatically from person to person. For some, it is individual pursuits like doing intricate needlepoint that is totally absorbing shutting out all other thoughts; for others it is participating in a team sport and yelling their lungs out; for others it's stupidly long baths with candles, a glass of chilled wine and three hot water top ups. For others, it's regularly volunteering somewhere local and meaningful where community is instantly experienced and mutual kindness just happens effortlessly.

There is strong evidence, that a third space can be powerful in creating greater balance and building positive wellbeing. Work out what inspires you and creates inner peace, gratitude and ultimately sustained happiness.

### Step 3

Take responsibility for your happiness. It might seem trite but think about it deeply and you'll see it is self-evident. You and you alone are in the driving seat of your life. To vest that power and control in others is dangerous and almost always ensures disappointment.



While we all love a good whinge, it's just not healthy or helpful to stay stuck in a cycle of negativity. Remember there are endless off ramps in conversations with others (or yourself) to change the conversation from the negative to something more positive and genuinely uplifting and future focused.

**Tip:** shift from past-based conversations focusing on the bad, sad or downright terrible, to the future. You are in the box seat to create a better tomorrow, or better next shift, so get in touch with your creative and positive self and make the good stuff happen.



## FIND OUT MORE

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Some extra tips and thoughts to explore that are relevant to all workers, in and out of healthcare...

1. Stop and breathe. Most times when we are feeling stressed, we forget to really breathe deeply and fully. And, you probably know, deeper breathing changes the pH of your blood in good ways.
2. Say “no” to new commitments. If you’re already feeling overwhelmed, don’t agree to participate in a research project or chair your unit’s Shared Governance Committee. Get whatever it is you are dealing with under control before you add something else to your plate and overextend yourself.
3. Make an inventory of your stressors. Write down the things that are causing you upset, anxiety, then brainstorm at least one way to reduce each stressor.
4. Set boundaries and stick to them. This requires some self-control. If you need to leave work by 5:00 p.m. to pick up your child from day care but you’re finishing patient charts at 5:40, then you’re not setting good boundaries at work. If you stay up late to binge on Netflix and don’t get enough sleep, you’re not setting good boundaries for sleep hygiene which is a key protective factor.
5. Delegate where possible. Is there a friend or relative that could help you out at home?
6. Unplug frequently every day. Set some new disciplines to ensure you go analogue and ditch the devices for chunks of the day.
7. Engage in healthy activities. Get enough sleep, eat healthy foods and exercise. Don’t be too hard on yourself if you’re not perfect but make the effort to get it right.
8. Plan holidays and mini breaks. Plan a long weekend and just get away a do ‘old school’ things like go for a hike, fly a kite, walk on a beach.
9. Practice gratitude. Actively practising gratitude has strong scientific evidence for improving resilience and mental wellbeing. Just do it.
10. Focus on meaning and purpose. What brings meaning and purpose to your life? What is about your work that brings great meaning and satisfaction. There’s usually a lot, so focus on that.
11. Seek support. Still struggling? Remember your EAP service, it’s free to you and your family and can be a critical circuit breaker. See details below.

*Adapted from: [clevelandclinic.org/nine-strategies-alleviating-nurse-burnout](https://clevelandclinic.org/nine-strategies-alleviating-nurse-burnout)*



### WE ARE ALWAYS HERE TO TALK

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