

Supporting Clinicians Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tip Sheet: Protecting the Doctor-Mom



This tip sheet offers suggestions for protecting the doctor-mom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Every doctor-mom must read this and give a copy to her spouse/significant other/partner, friends, and family members. She is rare, beautiful, and valuable to so many. Let's do all we can to protect her!

First...You are amazing and valuable!!!

- This is the only place to start. You have gone through the medical school and residency process and you survived or are surviving now! That is no easy feat! Remember, women make up only 34% (~292,003) of all the 860,000 physicians in the United States and that is less than 1% of all the women in the country! So, you are unique, you are rare, and you are valuable to society!
- While women physicians are increasing and almost 50% of all medical school classes are now females, it means women physicians are the future of medicine. So, while we are sacrificing now, we will learn what we want and how to obtain it as we learn the lessons of life.
- What is it about doctor-moms that make them so special? Women physicians are amazing listeners and are compassionate beings. They are giving and supportive of their patients, as well as their own families. There are many working moms in the world and you are one of them!
- What you do for patients and family: Doctor-moms are willing to 'be there' for everyone! Her family and patients are prominent, and she never stops feeling the tug between the two. She often sacrifices herself to give to everyone else.
- What you sacrifice: As a doctor-mom, you know you sacrifice self, family, salary, position, title, and roles to do what you do in a male dominated profession.
- What you deal with daily: The doctor-mom deals with many feelings, emotions, and demands daily during her life and career. All are heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic because stress levels are higher, and lack of control is even more evident.



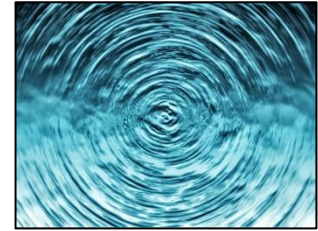
**You are
valuable!**

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What happens when a doctor-mom is stressed?

- The ripple effects of being stressed affects everyone around you: self, family, relatives, colleagues, staff, and patients.
- Solid reputations may go unscathed when a physician exerts/demonstrates stressed behaviors and reactions. However, if reputations are already challenging or weakened by past distressed behaviors, your reputation could take a hit.
- Self-care is usually the first thing to go. Doctor-moms already stress out over taking care of families, especially their kids and especially when those children are at younger ages who require more attention and caregiving responsibilities.
- With reduced selfcare, doctor-moms become even more vulnerable to minor stressors, much less significant stressor such as dealing with COVID-19.
- Chronic stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic may also result in reduced resilience, mood, and ability to learn and recall previous memories. It is also associated with more anxiety, risk of depressed moods, burnout and impairment from substances if used to help with coping.
- Chronic stress also reduces immune systems of the doctor-mom who may be more vulnerable to getting sick or developing stress reactions within their body such as neck/back aches, GI symptoms, palpitations, etc.
- Reduced recall will cause concern for mental capacity/cognitive load which becomes a vicious cycle of concern for doctor-moms that we aren't able to handle both being a doctor and being a mom. This can increase the feeling of imposter syndrome and lead to reduced self-efficacy.



How should doctor-moms deal with the guilt?

- The doctor-mom already has concerns about being a 'good mom' compared to stay-at-home moms. We don't need the extra stress of comparing ourselves to stay-at-home moms during COVID-19!
- Those moms are used to being at home with kids and maybe even used to home schooling. Doctor-moms are not. This will be a significant adjustment if a doctor-mom stays home and is still working and has kids to tend to during the day.
- We have a great sense and pride in working outside the home with a great and powerful sense of meaning and purpose. Do not forget your purpose and what you bring to the table of life.
- Being a doctor and mom doesn't have to contradict each other. You can be both and you can be good at both. Keep your expectations of your roles in perspective. Don't lose sight that you are a doctor and a mom.
- When stress is increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflect often on the value you bring to your patients, your learners, and your family.
- Keep it simple – do the best you can in the moment you have, whether at home or at work. Remember, quality time can be more important than the quantity of time.




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What are the fears of a doctor-mom?

- Doctor-moms fear the worst because they know the truth about the risks of COVID-19. They will fear:
 - Getting infected
 - Bringing it home to a spouse/partner or their children
 - Dying of COVID-19
 - Leaving their children without a mom
 - Missing their children grow up, weddings, grandchildren births, etc.
 - Abandoning their patients if they are out for a prolonged illness
 - Loss of income if their office is shut down or limited to telehealth and lower reimbursement rates
 - Making the decisions that sacrifice some at the expense of others
 - Risking relationships in order to fulfill policies and practice bylaws
 - Not being capable of the role changes and leadership responsibilities in an unprecedented time such as COVID-19
 - The loss of community with their colleagues, friends, networks
 - Stigma and fear of being 'seen as' weak, needing help, needing treatment
 - Fear of stressing/placing burdens on your colleagues who must cover for you if you get sick or have to stay home to care for kids

What can the doctor-mom do to help keep her family safe during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- **Protect yourself first!** Do everything possible to protect you and your family. (See our tip on protecting the physician during the COVID-19 pandemic.)
- **Keep your family safe by having a clean, stress-free home.** But that doesn't mean you have to do it all. Pay for what you need if you can. Have a stable housekeeper who you trust do the housekeeping or allow your favorite childcare provider to live in. This may cost more, but if it provides peace of mind and safety for your entire family – do it. It may not be forever.
- **Remain spiritually focused.** Those with a strong sense of spirituality can sometimes do better in response to stresses and abrupt changes. Find strength in your faith, religious practices, and the beauty of nature. 
- **Negotiate household changes with your spouse/partner/significant other.** Divide and conquer is perhaps the best survival mode. Sit down and think together how your schedules work that allow children to be cared for and supported, but that also allows your work responsibilities to be maintained. You both will likely have to give and take. But remember – you are a team.

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- **Call in help when needed.** If you're a hospitalist and you must be on-call or cover weekends at a time and your spouse is nearing his/her wits end, call in back up. Do you have a family member who you trust to live in for a few weeks to help out – three can handle the load better than two and allows the doctor-mom to get the much needed rest and recuperation she needs to get back to work and be whole and fully present.
- **Use services that help make it easier for you!** Doctor-moms tend to want to do it all...that's fine, but times like these allow for delegation. Consider some of these time-saving tips.
 - Use food delivery services or pick up food on the way home and limit spouse/significant other/partner exposures to others in the community.
 - Consider dropping off clothes at the laundromat and picking up a folded, clean stack of cloths.
 - Put off unnecessary tasks until down times. (E.g.: you may need gas in the car to get to/from work, but the car doesn't have to be clean or you may not have to wipe down every entire surfaces at home or that paper you were writing could wait in order to take on other tasks related to learning telehealth. The ACP has a great learning module on conducting visits via telehealth.)
 - Enlist the family in the chores. All ages can contribute to chores around the house and it cuts down on how much the doctor-mom does alone and allows more time for family fun and resting.
 - For infants – get them in that infant carrier while you are vacuuming – in fact, let the other parent/significant other/partner do that; infants need good bonding time with both parents.
 - For little kids (2-4) – the old Barney clean up song still works.
 - For older kids (5-10) – ask them what parts of keeping their house straightened do they like the most – assign the roles and have a family clean for at least an hour 1-2 times a week.
 - Older adolescents and young adults (12-20's) in the household – they can rotate cycles of jobs – allow them to come up with the schedule and you support them in the tasks – no extra work on your side. 😊 No allowances needed – this is a time the family comes together to do the right things as a unit. But a few incentives won't hurt.
 - Think of any home-related (work -related matter too) that you don't like doing – is there an app for that? How can you delegate those chores or activities that cause stress or reduce your time toward recuperation and rest?



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What does the doctor-mom need during COVID-19?

- **From her colleagues?** – support and encouragement; a sense of we are all in this together, equality, shared/balanced loads, and motivation
- **From her family?** – love, encouragement, laughter, and safety
- **From her extended family?** – help and assistance in time of need; offering before she needs to ask; support for her children and sometime preoccupying the kids so she can get her charting done (a good family facetime or zoom with appropriate aged kids is not only a distraction but a wonderful, meaningful family experience for all)
- **From her friends?** – touching base periodically, listening, and laughter when she needs it, not overburdening her with other problems if she is too stressed to handle her own problems
- **From her spouse/partner/significant other?** – love, love making when she is rested and engaged, a feeling of ‘we are a team,’ a feeling of balance, help lifting her up when she doesn’t have the strength to lift herself up, a nice quiet place to sleep without interruptions from kids, the pet, or her spouse/partner/significant other
- **From her pet(s)?** – that unconditional love of a lick, purr, paw on the cheek, or resting next to your doctor-mom while watching her favorite TV show, and all the ways the pet says I love you in their best pet way
- **From her patients?** – understanding it is the system and process and not the doctor-mom’s fault, patience with the technology the doctor-mom has to use - even if she didn’t want to use it, patience with the nursing and clinic or hospital staff who are all also stressed, overworked, and exhausted
- **God, a supreme being, source other than yourself, nature, other gods/goddesses?** – unconditional love and hope that she will survive this one too



What can spouses/Significant others and partners do daily to help the doctor-mom?

- Say, “I love you.”
- Send occasional pictures or short videos showing her what the kids are doing/have done today. Send these at the lowest time of her day or at the end of her shift/workday
- Give her a good reason to want to come home
- Schedule talk time – for just the two of you
- Surprise her every now and then with something personal – a hand written note in her briefcase, an apple to keep the other doctors away, a piece of her favorite candy in her purse, bring the kids in the care to her work so when she gets out – they are the first people she sees walking out the door (but keep them in the car until mom has gone)



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home and decontaminated appropriately, especially if working directly with COVID-19 patients)

- Have dinner ready/ordered for her
- Take time to schedule and plan for intimacy – get the kids tucked in early at least once a week, based on her schedule
- Tell her why you are proud of her
- Read to her, pray with her, journal together, talk about stressors
- Workout with her – walking, jogging, or just talk to her while she's working out or leave her alone while she's working out
- Eat meals together – even if only once in the morning or evening – depending on what works best for her and the family
- Remind her of all the great things that happened while she was away
- Tell her when it is time to quit – searching the internet, working too hard at less important tasks, etc.
- Help her recognize when she is stressed and especially if she doesn't recognize it herself; this means don't blame or berate her if she has a slip and a stressful reaction. Recognize it is her stress and that you can let it slide. "Honey, I see you seem to be short tempered today? Are you stressed? How can I help?" Don't match her tone, stay calm. This names the behavior you observed without assigning blame and allows her to decode it. You are being supportive and willing to help if she needs it.

How does the doctor-mom survive the pandemic?

- Takes care of herself first and values herself
- Asks for what she needs
- Learns to express her concerns
- Says 'I love you' and express love to her family
- Manages doctor-mom guilt
- Delegates appropriately
- Let's go of the things she cannot control – *"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."*
- Is assertive in obtaining necessities for self-protection – "Today I need some rest because I am exhausted. I need everyone to pitch in cleaning up after dinner so we can all get to sleep earlier tonight." "I need PPE and rest to continue doing my job."
- Faces her realities with hope – "I may be in this COVID-19 situation now, but I will survive."



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The Stockdale Paradox:

Facing the brutal facts of your current reality but retaining hope that you will prevail in the end.

James Stockdale – United States Navy Vice Admiral and aviator awarded the Medal of Honor in the Vietnam War; in the book, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins

When the pandemic sends the doctor-mom's head to that place no one wants to go.

- If you haven't thought of it already, great. But it is likely you have thought about what happens if you get COVID-19 and worse, what would happen if you died from it? Some other thoughts in this place include what if I bring COVID-19 home to my kids or spouse/partner, then you may have thought some of these thoughts in your head.
- What is the contingency plan if you and/or your spouse/partner is sick and unable to care for your children? What is the backup plan?
- Are you prepared for the worst possible outcome? Wills, durable power of attorney, a healthcare proxy?



How does the doctor mom keep her head in the best place during the pandemic?

- Prioritizes herself to the top of the to do list
- Prayer/faith
- Talks about stressors, feelings, hopes, fears
- Recognizes all those things she is grateful for, and finds gratitude wherever she can see it throughout the day
- Has supportive people around her
- Whispers reflective positive statements and mantras to herself – especially when no one else can
- Looks at pictures of those she loves the most, nature, and pets
- Gives and receives love freely
- Allows herself to feel and be vulnerable in the moment
- Receives love and support from others
- She seeks help, professionally, when she has tried all these things and they aren't working



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Dedicated to all the doctor-moms, heroes, and “she-hulks”



Picture - courtesy of Dr. Zenobia Jones Foster, whose son called her the ‘She - Hulk!’

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Resources: MH specialists, coaches, psychiatry, primary doctor, etc. Each picture is hyperlinked to the actual webpage. Simply click on the picture.

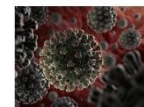
- American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/> - click on *psychological help center*, then *find a psychologist*.
- International Coaching Federation: <https://coachfederation.org/> - click on *find a coach*.
- American Psychiatric Association: <https://www.psychiatry.org/> - click on *Patient/Families* then click *find a psychiatrist*.
- The American College of Physicians – COVID-19 Resources for physicians. <https://www.acponline.org/>
- The American Medical Association – resources for Physicians. <https://www.ama-assn.org/>
- The National Academy of Medicine – Well-being resources. <https://nam.edu/initiatives/clinician-resilience-and-well-being/clinician-well-being-resources-during-covid-19/>
- Tennessee Medical Association - resources for COVID-19. <https://www.tnmed.org/>

Resources

- Find a Psychologist
- Order Free Brochures
- Request a Speaker

Find a Coach

PATIENTS & FAMILIES



COVID-19 (2019 novel coronavirus) resource center for physicians
5/27/2020

