



How to Discuss COVID-19 with Family When You Work in Health Care

While many in the U.S. are struggling with the adjustment to social distancing recommendations and stay-at-home orders, those of us who work in health care are having a much different experience during this pandemic.

While the public at large is being exposed to non-stop commentary on the dwindling PPE supply, the current infection rate and the importance of limiting human contact in an effort to “flatten the curve,” health care workers and first responders are seeing this firsthand. Staying at home and away from those who might be symptomatic just isn’t an option for those of us charged with responding to emergencies or treating sick patients. As the nation grows increasingly anxious in response to all the uncertainty that surrounds us right now, it can be difficult to know how to talk with family and friends about your role in this crisis.

When family and friends express concern about your role:

- While it’s not productive to join in the mounting hysteria, it is important to acknowledge the gravity of the situation at hand and offer reassurance. You can validate others’ concerns and let them know what you’re doing to take care of yourself. Remind them (and yourself) that your role is vital to the health and safety of the public. Be realistic and transparent about your level of risk, but also offer facts about protocols that are in place to mitigate those risks as much as possible.

When children in your life express fear that you’ll get sick or die:

- Remain calm and offer reassurance. Let them know that you’re doing the very best you can to stay well. Within age-appropriate limits, share with them about the things you’re doing to protect yourself, and the protocols that are in place to support you in that endeavor. Tell them how much you love them, and make time to talk with them and answer any questions they have. Consider limiting children’s exposure to COVID-19-related media. Instead, do what you can to offer honest, accurate information. Teach them about ways they can help everyone stay safe, like using a tissue or aiming into their elbow when they need to cough, and washing their hands with soap and water.

When others demonstrate a cavalier attitude or boast about continuing to engage in behaviors that put them (and others) at greater risk:

- Lead with empathy, and try offering validation that dealing with extra rules and precautions is difficult for all of us. Try not to fear-monger, but let them know how this pandemic is impacting you and your work. Correct any misinformation that may be guiding their choices, and offer facts instead. Acknowledge that they’re free to make their own choices, and encourage them to examine for themselves where their values and priorities really lie. Offer information about the precautions you’re taking, and why they’re important to you.