

Key human factors messages – when working under pressure

Good teamwork, leadership and communication – non-technical skills – will give you, patients and colleagues a **better chance of staying safe**.

1. Brief the whole team, even if rapid and short

Best at the start of a shift but can be done at any stage to achieve a shared mental model. You may know what needs doing, but do your colleagues?

Tips

- Agree clear language protocols to avoid ambiguity and speed-up responses.
- Ensure clarity of roles: Who, how & what if?
- Agree a way to share concerns.
- Brief prior to donning PPE if possible.

2. Take deliberate action when under stress

Anxiety and stress drive action in simple situations, but our current situation is not simple. Take a moment before trying to think about what to do.

You're hard-wired to act – when there's high stress:

Tips

- Take deep breaths or count to 10.
- Pause the team – with an agreed action or word.
- Use a mnemonic such as ABCDE to guide initial action.
- Ask an open question – What do *you* think is happening?
- Use a task, such as, donning PPE, to pause.

3. Lead by being open and inclusive for rapidly changing scenarios

'Ask questions first and lead second'. Listen to expertise based on who knows what's happening now. Listen to staff from different disciplines and levels of seniority for further insight to threats and error.

Tips

- Ask open questions before acting – What do we think is happening?
What do we need to do?
- Focus on *what's* right, not *who's* right.

4. Help staff unfamiliar with the work

New staff, such as, retired staff or non-ICU and emergency staff, may feel under-prepared or insecure if unfamiliar. Ensure protocols are clear and practices and equipment are explained. If time, give new staff the opportunity to practise using simulation.

Tips

- Be kind and empathise and anticipate stress triggers.
- Explain why things are done in a specific way.

5. Use checklists and aide memoires to support tasks

Do the action, then check output not input, for example, turn oxygen on and check the flow, not the position of the switch. Don't move-on until you've checked the output or received the appropriate response. Try to avoid interruptions, these significantly increase errors.

Tips

- Make each action deliberate and thoughtful.
- If interrupted, stop and consider if starting from the beginning is safer.

6. Encourage staff to speak-up

Encourage all staff to speak-up about their concerns; they might be the one who prevents an avoidable disaster. A low authority gradient makes it easier for junior or new members to speak-up, for example, making sure everyone has been introduced by name and ensuring eye contact.

Tips

- Praise and don't belittle anyone who asks a question or raises issues.
- Give permission explicitly for all staff to raise concerns.

7. Recognise performance limiting factors

Good team players recognise colleagues who are under stress and support them by sharing workload and giving emotional support. Look out for the stresses that affect performance, such as, tiredness, worries, other's poor behaviour, illness, noise, distractions and hunger.

Tips

- Remind each other to take a break – we may recognise this ourselves.
- Adhere to break schedules and ensure staff eat, drink and use the bathroom, especially if wearing PPE for long periods.
- Give permission explicitly for all staff to raise concerns.

8. Debrief as a team to learn from experiences

Your experiences can play on your mind, especially the mistakes you think you might have made. At the end of a shift debrief as a team and share thoughts to enable learning and maintain mental wellbeing. Sign-post staff to available support measures and check the Open Disclosure Policy.

Tips

- Ask open questions – What were we proud of? What were the challenges?
- Role model – share personal feelings and reflections. Encourage others.

9. Think about the wider healthcare team

All staff will be under pressure, for example, reception, pharmacy, porters, but they may not have the training and experience for this situation. They may look to you for ideas and support. And they may have critical insights that you don't have.

Tips

- Listen to questions and issues they raise about patients - they may have crucial information.
- Support them with their PPE use and listen to their concerns about contact with potential COVID patients.