



## Dealing with Guilt during Covid19- NHS Staff NOT on the frontline

Never have NHS staff received so much positive public support and attention – from being ‘clapped’ every Thursday, lauded with rainbows, to press and the public regularly talking of NHS ‘heroes’. And indeed many NHS staff are facing huge demands and challenges, and having to work at their limits to deliver frontline care in the Covid crisis. But... many are NOT on the ‘frontline’ – and are struggling with feeling guilty about this. Here are some thoughts and ideas, which could be useful.

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The reality is that there are many NHS staff who are not involved, at the moment, in Covid19 ‘frontline’ work – and often not through their own choice. This may be because of the nature of their role, the organisational decisions about who does what, their own health, or the need for them to comply with national guidance around ‘lockdown’ and social distancing for non-essential or routine work. The NHS is polarised by Covid19 – from extreme activity to unusual quietness, from busy wards to people spending weeks isolating at home. NHS staff experience is different and divided.

NHS staff may well be a self-selecting group – people who chose their line of work to feel useful, to contribute or make a difference to others. It is part of their identity to help, and they are used to being busy in their efforts to do so.

When talking to these staff from a wide range of backgrounds, a common theme of their experience is guilt – feeling bad that they are either ‘business as usual’ or even under-occupied, because their normal roles are not possible. Feeling bad for struggling with being ‘cooped up’ at home, when others are in frantic wards. One staff member described feeling terrible when a neighbour offered to mow her lawn, as she “must be so busy at work”. She felt like a fraud, blaming herself for not helping more, despite having made every effort to volunteer her services where they might be useful.

This is echoed by many staff who are privately giving themselves a hard time for not being exhausted, overworked and stretched to the maximum. This ‘survivor guilt’ resonates somewhat with descriptions from people who fortunately escaped harm in a major incident or trauma. NHS staff see others looking at them as heroes – an image they do not feel they are fulfilling – or imposters, who are surviving whilst their colleagues slog. All this can cause suffering.

The following ideas may be useful for NHS staff, or others, who are struggling in this way.

- We are all cogs in a bigger machine, and the nature of this crisis means that some have roles in active 'Covid work' – whilst for some (and many in wider society) their duty and contribution if not 'frontline' is to step back – an active choice, in order to limit virus spread. This is not a selfish act. For many is not their preference or choice – all the same, it is essential. Feelings of frustration, guilt and helplessness are the challenges you have to face. Treat yourself with kindness.
- Give yourself permission to take steps to cope with the frustration, and see this as an active contribution to society and to the NHS, in keeping yourself and colleagues positive. Place value on development work that you never would normally get chance to do, and on maintaining team connections with chats and check-ins. Getting yourself and colleagues through this as well as possible will ensure you are as robust as possible when regular work resumes – this will benefit the NHS and its patients.
- Focus on what you can influence, rather than what you cannot. There will be many things you can't change, including organisational decisions, lack of creative thinking or human errors, which will occur especially in these times of pressure. Humans do not problem solve optimally when under threat, and many decision makers are overloaded with the volume of information they must process. Try to remain compassionate with organisations too – they are run by people, and all people under pressure are likely to have reduced 'bandwidth' with which to operate.
- Find ways to express your values where you can – in outlets available to you. You may not be able to 'graft on the front line', but you could contribute and make a difference by checking up on colleagues, spending time chatting to a lonely neighbour, trying not to snap at the kids, being grateful and considerate to other keyworkers in the supermarket, doing a really good job of the tasks in front of you. Be proud of whatever effort you can make, however small. Maybe even note these small wins down, or share them as a team, to acknowledge them as important.
- Remember – you did not ask to be clapped! This 'NHS hero' movement came about separately from you as an individual. You didn't tell everyone you were key to the Covid effort in your Trust, or running the testing facilities through the night. You are not a fraud or imposter because you have not been dishonest. Many people in the NHS are in the same situation- it is not a personal weakness or failing, nor a situation you chose. It is just reality – our experiences are all different.

In summary – the wonderful celebration of NHS 'heroes' can be uncomfortable for anyone who (through no fault of their own) does not feel 'heroic'.

Non-frontline NHS staff are doing their duty, just as much as anyone else. 'Duty' just looks different for different groups. Their task is to keep going with care and compassion, manage frustration and feeling powerless, look out for each other, and value the contribution they are able to make. This is their service.