

COVID-19 Superheroes



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It is five in the morning as a healthcare worker gets out of bed. Let us call her Emma. She is self-isolated from the rest of the family in her own home. It has been months since she hugged her children and her husband. She gets ready and heads out to work. It is barely seven in the morning when she begins her shift – one of many dozens she has done in these terrible conditions.

She is one of the hundreds of thousands around the world who has made the choice to work in conditions that the rest of us do everything to avoid. Healthcare workers all around the world are unique individuals. Janitors, support staff, doctors, EMT workers, nurses, aides are essential in a healthcare world without whose selfless caring work, we would all be helpless when we get sick. They help us through sickness and recovery with a devotion to their work that rivals that of any other profession. Most of us are emotionally vulnerable when we are sick. It is the love and caring attention from our immediate family and the second family who are the healthcare workers at the hospital that help us through our recovery. Sick children and older people are especially vulnerable, and anyone who has seen these healthcare workers at a hospital tending to them knows how devoted they are to their profession.

COVID-19, to put it mildly, has wreaked havoc with its virulence and its indiscriminate spread among all ages and races. It has, however, hit the poor and those of colour in an especially cruel way. The economic devastation that has followed the pandemic for these has been especially harsh. While the spouses and other family members of the healthcare workers have been hit with job losses and income losses, they, the healthcare workers, are having to absorb this financial downturn along with the emotional distress this has brought to their families.

Healthcare workers are like the firefighters, the police and other disaster relief workers – they rush in to help when the rest of us are fleeing the danger. They carry a tremendous amount of mental fortitude that helps them remain focussed on helping those who are in their care. Their professional exterior fools most of us mere mortals from getting a glimpse at the emotional burden they carry. Healthcare workers have great empathy for their patients' suffering. Yet they keep it from getting in the way of caring for the patient and their family. This unique juxtaposition puts a burden on their emotional health. We rarely realise how this affects them especially in the midst of a pandemic like COVID-19.

Doctors, nurses and others responsible for the administration and management of healthcare institutions are in a constant battle with the rising cases and limited and sometimes declining resources. They are put in situations that force them to make choices in the level of care depending on the age of the sickest patients. This is a cruel and unfair burden that this pandemic is putting on them. The emotional burden of such monumental decisions that they are making will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Healthcare workers did not sign up for this kind of emotional burden. What makes this worse is that it is not for a day, or a week or a month that they are subject to these conditions. The end is nowhere in sight. Remember Emma we used as an example at the beginning? There are hundreds and thousands of Emmas around the world who are going through this hell. Every. Single. Day.

The question that we should be asking ourselves is, "what can we do to make their lives less traumatic?" The answer is quite simple. The guidelines that most healthcare organisations have laid out are easy to follow. Let us do everything to keep ourselves and our family and friends immune to this disease. Wearing a mask, remaining indoors, venturing out only when it is absolutely essential such as replenishing groceries and supplies, or getting a brief outdoor exercise. The science is clear – keeping a safe distance from others, wearing a mask/face covering, avoiding social gatherings completely, avoiding unnecessary travel entirely are extremely effective in curbing the spread of the virus. Considering how quickly such measures on our part can contain and eventually stop the spread of the virus, these measures cannot even be seen as 'sacrifices.' What the healthcare workers do for us and how much they risk their own lives and those of their loved ones is the real sacrifice.

Those of us in the mental health professions can also help them. Providing online therapy sessions for free would go a long way in limiting the trauma that these healthcare workers suffer from. There are several secure video conferencing applications available that can be used to offer free psychological counseling to these angels. If every psychology therapist offers two hours every week for such free online sessions, a considerable number of healthcare workers can benefit. The emotional fallout from this pandemic on the healthcare workers and their immediate

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family is hard to measure. With the pandemic raging on, it is unclear when the end will come and how many more lives it would have claimed by that time. The pain from the loss of lives is clearly hardest on the families; but the pain of witnessing this while in the throes of trying to prevent deaths every day with no end in sight is immeasurable on the healthcare workers.

While we are cognizant of the sacrifices that these brave heroes are making every day, we are not doing enough to mitigate the pain and suffering they endure daily. Let us all do our part by following the healthcare guidelines most rigorously. Let us sing our praises through our actions. Let us keep ourselves and those around us away from the virus and sickness from it. That would be the highest praise we could possibly heap on these heroes. We stand apart to stand together for their welfare and health.

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