

> “I do not shrink from this responsibility,
I welcome it.” —John F. Kennedy, inaugural address

COVID-19 CRISIS

We must care for ourselves as we care for others

CCOVID-19 has changed our world. Social distancing is now the norm and flattening the curve is our motto. Family physicians’ place on the front line of medicine is more important now than it has ever been.

In the Pennsylvania community in which we work, the first person to don protective gear and sample patients for viral testing in a rapidly organized COVID-19 testing site was John Russell, MD, a family physician. When I asked him about his experience, Dr. Russell said, “No one became a fireman to get cats out of trees ... it was to fight fires. As doctors, this is the same idea ... this is a chance to help fight the fires in our community.”

And, of course, it is primary care providers—family physicians, internists, pediatricians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and nurses—who day in and day out are putting aside their own fears, while dealing with those of their family, to come to work with a sense of purpose and courage.

The military uses the term “operational tempo” to describe the speed and intensity of actions relative to the speed and intensity of unfolding events in the operational environment.

**We, as family
physicians, have
the training to lead
with courage and
empathy.**

Family physicians are being asked to work at an increased speed in unfamiliar terrain as our environments change by the hour. The challenge is to answer the call—and take care of ourselves—in unprecedented ways. We often use anticipatory guidance with our patients to help prepare them for the challenges they will face. So, too, must we

anticipate the things we will need to be attentive to in the coming months in order to sustain the effort that will be required of us.

With this in mind, we would be wise to consider developing plans in 3 domains: physical, mental, and social.

■ **Physical.** With gyms closed and restaurants limiting their offerings to take-out, this is an opportune time to create an exercise regimen at home and experiment with healthy meal options. YouTube videos abound for workouts of every length. And of course, you can simply take a daily walk, go for a run, or take a bike ride. Similarly, good choices can be made with take-out and the foods we prepare at home.

■ **Mentally** we need the discipline to take breaks, delegate when necessary, and



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GUEST EDITORIAL

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use downtime to clear our minds. Need another option? Consider meditation. Google “best meditation apps” and take your pick.

■ **Social distancing** doesn't have to mean emotional isolation; technology allows us to connect with others through messaging and face-to-face video. We need to remember to regularly check in with those we care about; few things in life are as affirming as the connections with those who are close to us: family, co-workers, and patients.

Out of crisis comes opportunity. Should we be quarantined, we can remind ourselves that Sir Isaac Newton, while in quarantine during the bubonic plague, laid the foundation for classical physics, composed theories on light and optics, and penned his first draft of the law of gravity.¹

■ **Life carries on, amidst the pandemic.** Even though the current focus is on the COVID-19 crisis, our many needs, joys, and challenges as human beings remain. Today, someone will find out she is pregnant; someone else will be diagnosed with cancer, or plan a wedding, or attend the funeral of a loved one. We, as family physicians, have the

training to lead with courage and empathy. We have the expertise gained through years of helping patients through diverse physical and emotional challenges.

We will continue to listen to our patients' stories, diagnose and treat their diseases, and take steps to bring a sense of calm to the chaos around us. We need to be mindful of our own mindset, because we have a choice. As the psychologist Victor Frankl said in 1946, after being liberated from the concentration camps, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”²

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