The New Reality: Ways to Connect and Support Remotely

Practical Tips for Team Members and Leaders

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Team members
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Which applies to your Team?

A: All members are virtual.
B: Some combination of virtual and in-person.
C: All members are in-person.
Of those who are on a Team where members are all or partially virtual, how many of you have made this transition since the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic?

A: Yes, we made the transition after the pandemic began

B: No, we began working remotely before the pandemic
POLL QUESTION #3

If you are working on a virtual team now, how do your current interactions and team functioning compare to the past when you were primarily interacting in person?

A: Little to no change

B: We are continuing our regular team meetings/huddles but have less unscheduled interaction

C: We seem significantly less connected as individual colleagues and as a team
AGENDA

▪ Our Team Description
▪ DOs: What Helps
▪ DONTs: What Isn’t Helpful
▪ Supporting Your Virtual Team: Being a Good "Team Player"
▪ Holiday Rituals and Team Support
▪ Resources
Team Structure
- Virtual from Inception
- No in-person team traditions/habits to change

Organizational Plan
- Mission
- Role Description
- Interface with Others
DOs: WHAT HELPS

Building & Fostering Team Cohesion/Culture

– Contacts that show you genuinely care
– Check in with everyone regularly
  • Structured/scheduled
  • Unstructured/unscheduled
– Role Clarity
  • Communication so that efforts are synergized and not at cross purposes…
– Build trust through transparency in discussions
– Discuss values and beliefs (e.g., diversity and inclusion, personality and interactional style differences) AND team is guided by them
Has your team discussed beliefs and values for the team?

A: Yes, we have discussed beliefs and values of the team

B: No, we have not discussed the beliefs and values of the team
DOs: WHAT HELPS

Communication

▪ Use humor
  – Create or expand upon team inside jokes
  – Use to soften constructive criticism and work through the inevitable conflicts

▪ Remember to allow for grace when things don’t work out as planned

▪ Remind each other of the importance of the shared vision

▪ Check in to determine if assignments need to be reassessed and redistributed based on changes
Communication (continued)

- **Missing Cues:**
  - Facial expressions or body language
  - Awareness of someone’s door being closed for longer than usual/typical
  - Extent of attention/focus

- **Available Cues:**
  - Tone of voice
  - Syntax of responses
  - Modality of contact
  - Responsiveness
  - Congruence of presentation
For those Teams that are now **predominately** virtual (including a mix of virtual in person), how is the quality of communication compared to when your team was predominately face-to-face/in person?

A. Harder  
B. Easier  
C. The same as in person
Communication (continued)

- Build a communication culture
  - Be explicit about collaborative decision making
  - Foster full team engagement during collaboration – be mindful of who isn’t engaging (*without making assumptions*)
  - Ensure the praise, opportunities, and ‘good times’ are shared as evenly as possible
  - Ensure the less desirable work is shared as equally as possible
  - Celebrate other’s expertise and encourage and accept input based on that expertise
Communication (continued)

- Working through conflict or disagreement
  - Focus on what can be controlled/addressed by the team
  - When team members disagree, those not actively involved work as mediators to resolve
    - Remind team of shared vision
    - Encourage grace and generosity
    - Promote fairness
    - Promote team cohesion
POLL QUESTION #6

How would you rate your virtual team on working through conflict or disagreement?

1 not good
2 somewhat good
3 OK
4 pretty good
5 very good
DOs: WHAT HELPS

Working as a Virtual Team Member (the “ME” in TEAM)

- Practice AND encourage self-care
- Structure your day
- Take breaks
- Tolerate & accept awkward interruptions
- Anticipate and expect IT fails
- Have virtual buddies
- Address any missteps or mistakes right away and in a non-defensive manner
- Remember you have Team Support…and remember to support your Team
DON’Ts: WHAT ISN’T HELPFUL

- **Not asking** for help from the Team
- Working on projects that might touch on Team work without updating the Team ("Going Solo")
- Cliques
- Unclear mission and/or Team values OR repeated violation of team mission/values
- Feelings of unfairness that are not discussed and resolved
- Lack of addressing emotional safety in the Team
- Team members not self-monitoring
- Team members not helping shape Team behavior
Effective Leaders Communicate

- Address Team members’ emotional needs appropriately
- Check in regularly
- Make contacts that are generally caring
- Attend to available communication signals
- Help the Team understand the impact of changing decisions on daily work. Help make meaning.
- Make sure Team knows that connecting with you is NOT a bother or inconvenience.
- Support your Team with feedback and praise: Be overt, be specific
SUPPORTING YOUR TEAM

- Effective Leaders engage in collaborative decision making whenever possible
- Effective Leaders provide information from Leadership above and other sources
  - Provide as much as you can, as often as possible
- Effective Leaders manage self-anxiety without losing humanity
  - Check-ins with your staff may be the only space they have to express these emotions
  - Share the space to grieve losses (e.g., normalcy, loved ones, shared space, etc.)
  - Foster hope and model gratitude by asking about these often
Effective Leaders set aside the focus on, and urgency around, managerial anxiety

- We may not be able to conduct a 50-minute session, and it might end up being a phone session → right now, that’s OK!

- wRVUs are not the focus right now, taking care of the Veteran/patient is the focus

- Replace this achievement drive with prioritizing DOING THE RIGHT THING

Celebrate the good things REGULARLY
GENTLE REMINDERS FOR ALL

- Be Kind – to yourself as well
- Not every connection effort or attempt fits every person’s need – keep trying
- Challenge yourself to give the benefit of the doubt
  - Try not to automatically assign negative interpretation to obscure or incomplete messages, or those that are open to interpretation
- Remember: To be meaningful it needs to be genuine, but the contact need not be excessively lengthy
- Favorite holiday candy "ice breaker" for a meeting
- Favorite holiday recipe exchange (bonus points for making & displaying the final product as reference during a virtual meeting)
Invite each team member to share a treasured holiday memory or favorite holiday tradition

Best virtual "background" picture displayed

Sharing rituals within the team in new ways:

- Virtual meeting with a prize for the wackiest holiday attire
- Attend a meeting dressed as a character from your favorite seasonal movie with prizes for most creative
- Cocoa "happy hour" where team is sent cocoa mix to personalize
Gratitude in the Midst of the Holiday Season

- If the goal of your team's holiday connecting is to share gratitude, consider volunteering as a team for a special cause.
- Consider completing a team 5k or other virtual 'race' that raises money for a local foodbank.
DISCUSSION

Please consider how you might respond to the following scenarios
SCENARIO #1

Now that your team has been working virtually for some time, several team members are concerned about what they perceive as a loss of opportunities for informal consultation and check ins with each other.

How might your team ensure these opportunities can continue?
SCENARIO #2

You notice that one or two people on your team seem to be “down” and saying things about feeling more isolated during the holidays this year.

Would you address what you notice? If so, how? If not, why not? What would you consider in making that decision?
Self care:

- **How Mental Health Providers Can Care for Themselves and Support Colleagues During the COVID-19 Virus Outbreak** *Patricia Watson, PhD*
- **Provider self care toolkit** (developed by NCPTSD)
- **Mindfulness Coach** (VA Approved App – can be used by everyone!)
- **COVID Coach** (Developed by NCPTSD for everyone to support self-care during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- **VA COVID-19 Employee Support Toolkit** (Developed by VHA’s Organizational Health Council)
- Technology
  - https://vaww.telehealth.va.gov/pgm/vcm/
  - https://vaww.telehealth.va.gov/technology/covid19-tech.asp

- Policy Guidance
  - VHA High Consequence Infection (HCI) Preparedness Program
  - COVID 19 Response and Guidance
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