Team Support (3)

Psychological First Aid

As managers, from time to time, you may notice increased anxiety in staff members, and you may be concerned about how to support staff around work based distress, loss and broader coping.

This document is part of a series of resources for managers, put together by the PSU, offering tips and tools to support you to support your colleagues. Some of these may also be useful for you to think about yourself too – **your wellbeing is paramount as you care for others**.

We've got this – we're making a difference

Adapted from resources developed by the Staff Wellbeing Psychology Team

North Bristol NHS Trust - staffwellbeingpsychology@nbt.nhs.uk

Psychological first aid: How to respond to distress in your colleagues

Many staff, including you, experience **elevated levels of anxiety** from time to time. They can arise during periods of disruption, rotation changes for example, when pressures at work, and possibly at home are a lot higher than usual eg exams, house move, new baby. There might be **familiar themes** that arise in conversations for individuals such as stress, loss (this isn't limited to loss of life but any kind of loss, trauma, and anxiety). Sometimes there is an urge to fix a situation, but this is rarely possible and we might not have all the answers right now. **You can play a key role by showing your colleague that you are hearing them, that you care, and that you will work together to find ways forward – as a team.**

- When staff are distressed it can feel overwhelming, and sometimes difficult to manage especially when you and others are possibly also feeling the impact of increased pressures and uncertainty.

- When we are stressed it's normal to feel things are more rushed, and it can be tempting to react quickly. Sometimes that may come across as worry, anxiety, other times frustration and anger.
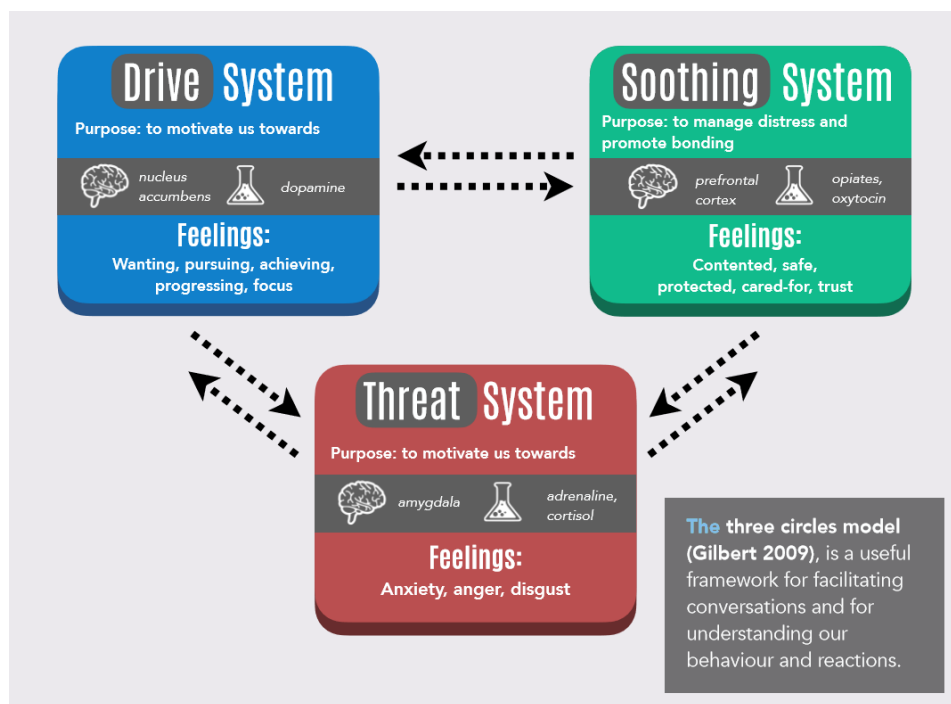

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The Systems:

The Drive System

- Activates us towards things we want and need. When we're put under pressure our initial response is usually to be highly driven to work hard and do a good job.

- This is important, but relying on **DRIVE** system without self-care can lead to exhaustion.

- Further, when we or our colleagues can't reach a goal (eg providing the level of care we aspire to) then the **THREAT** system can get chronically triggered, and possible burnout.
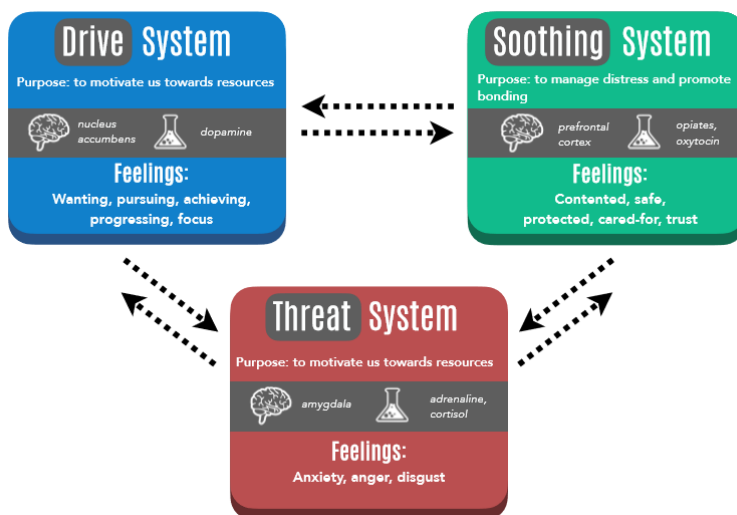
The Soothing System

• Is activated when we feel connected and safe. It regulates threat and drive. During times of pressure and crisis it may be difficult for people to feel safe and connected.

• So it is important that staff have opportunities to connect with colleagues, take breaks, use annual leave as needed, be welcomed back from time off and have as much sense of safety as possible.

Threat system 'fight, flight, and freeze'

• During times of pressure and crisis most people's threat system will be highly activated continuously.

• As well as triggers from external threats (i.e. working hard, hectic rota, exam pressures etc) we can also react in the same way when we THINK of these triggers. Worrying about the worst outcome or fear of not being able to cope prompts the same physiological response.

• We need to look out for behaviours which are out of character and support our teams and ourselves. When people are in the threat system they can behave defensively for example, be snappy or shut down and withdraw to cope.

• Remember - underneath anger may be worry or fear of the unknown, no control of the situation etc.

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When Drive and Threat systems are active it's important we also actively engage our Soothing System so we can respond in line with our values rather than engage in knee jerk reactions.

Given that time is limited, how might be best to do this?

Below are a few ways you can help support your colleagues……….

Validate: whatever the concern, it is important that individuals feel heard

- Use body language to show that you're listening.
- Be aware of listening more than talking.
- Acknowledge their personal history.

Things you can say:

"It makes sense you are feeling like this because……

I understand why you are feeling like that

Given all that is going on at the moment, it's understandable that you…."

Normalise: it is normal to feel anxious

Working in a setting where you can't work from home and where your job requires you to "keep going" can threaten our usual coping skills. Remember a colleague's response to stress may be influenced by underlying difficulties you may or may not know about. For example:

- Colleagues might be worried about their own health conditions, or the welfare of someone they live with, or family member.
- Colleagues may already be receiving medical or psychological support for their mood and additional pressures (however small) can make it more difficult to cope.

Things you can say:

"Most people would feel similar in this situation

It's really normal to have that reaction…

There's no 'normal' way to react, I understand why it's a really difficult time"

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FOCUS: Whilst it is completely natural for us to get lost in our worries, it's often not useful or helpful

The single most useful thing anyone can do in any type of crisis is to: **focus on what's in your control**.

We all have **far more control over our behaviour, than we do over our thoughts and feelings**. So our number one aim is to bring our awareness into the here and now, take a brief pause, and focus on what we can do that is within our control (i.e. our behaviour). This involves both dealing with our inner world – all our difficult thoughts and feelings - and our outer world – all the real problems we are facing. this can make it more difficult to cope.

Things you can say:

> **"Is there anything you need to offload?**
>
> **What do you need? (from me / from the team / from others)**
>
> **(After validating) enquire What might be within your control right now that you can focus your attention to?**
>
> **What things are you doing at the moment to make sure you are caring for yourself?"**

Your own wellbeing as a manager

It is really important to remember that '**it is ok not to be ok**'.

> It's common to focus on the wellbeing of others first but as managers we must look after ourselves and each other as best we can, so that you can be well resourced to support others. As the saying goes 'We need to put our own oxygen masks on before helping others'.

Support and resources available to all (including you as a manager):

A selection of open access, supportive, resources and tools, including playlists, resources and tools available for download here:

https://psu.walesdeanery.org/support-services/resource-locator

Wellbeing Resources from Health Boards and Trusts across NHS Wales:
https://leadershipportal.heiw.wales/go/cp92la -

Health for Healthcare Professionals: https://www.hhpwales.co.uk/ or call **0800 058 2738** or email - Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

BMA Doctors-for-Doctors: http://bma.org.uk/practical-support-at-work/doctors-well-being/about-doctors-for-doctors or call **08459 200 169 (landline: 01455 254 189**) - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The resources in this series:

1: Supporting staff: 5 levels of care

2: Psychological safety: How managers can help foster this key area

3: Psychological first aid: How to respond to distress in your colleagues

4: How to support staff with acute anxiety or panic – a brief grounding exercise

5: 3 Step team procedure (including STOP for 15)

6: Team / peer to peer psychological debriefing

7: Other tips for supporting your team