



# Impacts of COVID-19

## STAFF BURNOUT

This evidence theme on impacts of COVID-19 is a summary of one of the key topics identified by a scoping review of staff burnout research.

### Key points

- COVID-19 is a highly contagious virus that can result in a range of symptoms from mild respiratory infections to severe pneumonia, and in some cases, it can be fatal.
- Older people with multimorbidity and who live in care homes and facilities are at high risk of COVID-19 infection. Those who care for the older adults within residential aged care settings may also find it challenging and stressful to cope with high workloads and stressors associated with COVID-19 impacts on residents/clients.
- The impact of burnout was particularly pronounced in the aged care workforce during the 5th COVID-19 wave in 2022.
- Aged care workers experienced distress and burnout due to COVID-19 related factors. Some examples included constant fear of contracting and spreading the virus, high job demands, and feeling inadequately prepared.

### What is COVID-19 in aged care?

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is contagious that can result in a range of symptoms from mild respiratory infections to severe pneumonia, and in some cases, it can be fatal. [1] Infection has led to elevated mortality rates globally, and older people are at increased risk. [1, 2] The risk of infection is reportedly higher for older people with underlying multimorbidity and who live in residential aged care facilities. [2] These environments act as incubator for infection due to high population densities and shared room facilities. [2]

Exposure to the effects of COVID-19 in combination with systems changes (i.e. management of visitors, care provision) to control and prevent the spread of virus have negatively impacted residential aged care workers. [3] The constant exposure to the virus, coupled with the responsibility of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of older residents, can lead to burnout among these workers. [3] The chronic stress and exhaustion resulting from these factors can have detrimental effects on the mental and physical wellbeing of aged care workers. [3]

## What do we know about COVID-19's impact on the aged care workforce?

The 2022 scoping review found five studies on COVID-19 and staff burnout in aged care workers. [4-8] The 2023 update found an additional nine studies that contributed to this theme. [9-17] The review found deterioration in working conditions for aged care staff in residential aged care facilities at the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. [16, 17] Studies from the initial wave in 2020 showed significant increase in emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, along with lower personal accomplishment compared to the pre-pandemic period. [9, 10, 13, 16] The impact was particularly pronounced in the aged care workforce globally during the 5th COVID-19 wave in 2022. [16] Post-pandemic in 2023, managers expressed heightened concerns about staff mental health, including post-traumatic stress disorders, with reports of increased burnout, emotional exhaustion, and poorer mental and physical health. [16] Job positions significantly impact stress and burnout levels. [13] Technical and executive staff report higher emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, while direct care staff showed the second-highest levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, coupled with the highest levels of personal achievement. [13]

**There were various stressors experienced by aged care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may lead to one or more symptoms of burnout:**

- Fear of contracting and spreading the virus [6, 7, 10, 11, 15, 16]
- Changes in care delivery and routines [10, 13, 15]
- Increased workloads (job-demands) [7, 8, 14, 15]
- Increased time spent working [5]
- Dealing with staff shortages [6, 7, 13, 16, 17]
- Financial stress related to unpredictability of available work [11]
- Feeling inadequately prepared, leading to negative attitudes towards work [13]
- Coping with high rates of resident deaths and insufficient time for mourning [6, 15]
- Facing media stigma. [17] One study suggested that it had taken an emotional toll on aged care workers and felt burdened by being publicly scrutinised [7]
- Struggling to obtain sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies [10, 14, 15]
- Managing additional tasks including having to wear, test and procure PPE [5, 6]
- Managing alternative care home visits and to manage contact between residents and families [5]
- Experiencing uncertainties due to frequent changes in public health directives and regulations [11, 15]

Aged care workers felt frustrated with the inability and lack of visitation from families. [5] Having to oversee family-resident interaction created a prison-like environment, which impacted on their wellbeing. [5] They also felt distressed when witnessing confusion and sadness (i.e. crying) from residents with dementia. [5]

Aged care workers were provided with additional resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, support groups, meditation classes, and designated quiet spaces to increase the awareness of staff mental health. [4] One study found that staff members practicing acceptance of thoughts and emotions during the pandemic demonstrated greater resilience. [12]

## What can an individual do?

- Identify and assess suitability of individual coping techniques (i.e. mindfulness, stress reduction techniques) that can help aged care workers to cope with stressors associated with the pandemic and to enhance physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.
- Have open communication with managers, colleagues, or support groups and share your experiences, challenges, and coping mechanism. This will allow development of a supportive network within the aged care workforce.

## What can an organisation do?

- Actively acknowledge challenges faced by staff (i.e. public acknowledgements, awards) to build a sense of value and appreciation.
- Implement support programs that addresses the concerns about staff mental health. These initiatives can provide tools for the aged care workforce to cope and build on their overall resilience.
- Integrate learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic into current policies for prevention and preparedness of future pandemics.

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