

# Health Care Workers: financial stress and mental health



## What this fact sheet covers:

- How financial stress affects mental health
- Strategies to cope with and address financial stress
- Helpful resources

If you are worried about money right now, you are not alone.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis, it is a financial and psychological crisis too. Many health care workers have lost significant income, unexpectedly. Private practitioners are reporting reduced patient attendance, while the outgoings remain the same (rent, insurance, equipment, etc).

Other health care workers have lost shifts due to ward closures. A recent survey found that **52% of Australian health care workers are very worried about their finances.**

## How financial stress affects mental health

The link between mental and financial health can be a vicious cycle: financial stress can lead to poor mental health, which can make taking action to protect your financial health harder.

People may engage in unhealthy behaviours to try to cope with financial stress, from avoidance, to overeating and alcohol and drug misuse, which in turn can worsen mental health.

Ongoing stress about money has been linked to physical ill health too, such as migraines, heart disease and sleep problems.

Although it may feel overwhelming right now, there are steps you can take to help manage your finances, which in turn will protect your mental health and allow you to feel more in control.

## Strategies to cope with and address financial stress

**1. Acknowledge the feelings, rather than bottling them up:** You may feel grief, fear, shock, confusion, anger and any number of other emotions right now. That is ok. It is important to recognise the losses and hardship you have experienced and acknowledge your feelings about it.

Bottling your feelings up or trying to block them by telling yourself 'others have it worse' can get in the way of moving forward. Acknowledging your financial situation and your feelings about it is the first step. Then you can take action to move forward.

**2. Share your concerns with people you trust.** Talking about your concerns with your support network, such as trusted family and friends, or colleagues will help you feel less isolated and may provide a new perspective or ideas to get through this difficult time. You don't have to go into details if you aren't comfortable doing so.



**3. Reduce unnecessary spending and high interest debt:** be pragmatic and focus on what you can control. Are there ways you can temporarily cut your expenses? Shop around for cheaper insurance premiums, phone plans etc. Before you buy new things, take a moment to consider if it will improve your life or just cause you stress (from having less money).

Spending less can help you feel more in control. Be creative without giving up on life's pleasures: consider a clothes swap, puzzle or game trade with friends. Avoid credit card debt if you can.

**4. Consult a financial counsellor:** If you need support managing your immediate debts, you can speak to a financial counsellor for free by calling the National Debt Hotline on 1800 007 007.

Financial counsellors can:

- suggest ways to improve your financial situation
- see if you're eligible for government concessions or support
- talk to your creditors about repayment arrangements
- help you apply for a hardship variation
- explain the risks of bankruptcy and debt agreements and talk through the alternatives
- refer you to other services for family support or legal aid.

**5. Explore ALL available opportunities for financial support, delayed payments, payment plans and financial relief.** Examples include: your bank, the government, your insurer, your utility providers, your phone company, and your internet provider. Bartering just became fashionable. For example, if you are renting, ask your building owner if they can reduce your payments during this time. A lot of landowners recognise the value of keeping good tenants and realise that it's not a good time to look for new tenants.

If you have lost your income or employment due to COVID-19, you may be eligible for

the government's JobKeeper or JobSeeker payment. You can learn more here: <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/households>

The Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and local community centres are offering emergency relief services to help with food vouchers or parcels, transport vouchers, chemist vouchers, clothing or furniture, back to school costs and even part payment of utility vouchers.

Now is not the time to let pride get in your way of taking action to protect your financial security. It can be a humbling to ask for support but remember that this season will pass and these opportunities exist precisely to help people get through difficult times.

**6. Create extra sources of income if possible.** Some industries are experiencing an increase in demand. The Australian Government Web Page Jobs Hub advertises jobs in these sectors.

You can also complete the job seeker form on Job Match, a service run by the United Workers Union that matches workers with employers in industries currently increasing their workforce.

**7. Upskill via online training or research** so that when your work resumes, you have new knowledge and expertise. It's a useful way to keep your mind occupied too.

**8. Connect with your patients** via email, social media and signage. Consider COVID-19 safe services you could offer, even if they provide limited financial return right now - play the long game.

**9. If you have children, reassure them.** Children can often pick up when their parents are under high levels of stress and may display internalising behaviours (like anxiety) or externalising behaviours (like aggression or misbehaving). Have age-appropriate conversations to reassure them that their basic needs will be met. Say things like, "This is not something that you have to worry about. That's my job, as a grown-up. I'm working hard to make sure that we have what we need".



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## 10. Practice positive reframing:

- Remind yourself that this situation is temporary and that you will recover. History shows that for every major drop in the economy, a period of growth follows, it'll just take time.
- Remember that you are not alone. Many people are also struggling with loss. Humans are resilient, and we have adapted and recovered from previous crises.
- Remember that you are more than your job.
- Notice those times, even now, when you feel joyful or even happy. It's ok to allow yourself to be distracted and entertained, and to laugh.
- Consider how and where you can enjoy any unexpected 'free time', for example, getting fit again, doing fun activities with your children, showing love and affection through your actions and behaviours, passing skills onto your children, talking about what matters beyond work and what you are grateful for, even now.
- Focus on one day at a time.

**11. Learn new techniques to manage stress and use them every day.** Check out our weekly mental health check in, self care planning guide, and relaxation techniques here. Alternatively, sign up to an online stress management course such as the [THIS WAY UP Stress Course](#).

**12. If you continue to feel overwhelmed, reach out for support from your GP or a mental health professional.**

Signs to look out for include:

- Negative impact on your day-to-day life
- Consistent and severe anxiety or low mood for more than two weeks
- Persistent feelings of grief or strong sense of loss of identity and self-esteem
- Increased and intense conflicts with others
- Using alcohol or other substances to cope
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide

Ask your GP about a referral to a psychologist or counsellor and other options for getting help. Many support services are offering telehealth (video or phone) options.

**If you need immediate support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Beyondblue on 1300 22 46 36 (available 24/7 within Australia). If you are in an emergency, call 000.**

## Helpful resources

Money Smart  
[moneysmart.gov.au](https://moneysmart.gov.au)

National Debt Helpline  
[ndh.org.au](https://ndh.org.au) or call 1800 007 007.

Jobs Hub  
[dese.gov.au/covid-19/jobs-hub](https://dese.gov.au/covid-19/jobs-hub)

Job Match  
[jobmatch.org.au](https://jobmatch.org.au)

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