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4 Self-Care Strategies for Caregivers in a Crisis

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(NOTE: If you or someone you know is struggling emotionally and needs help, the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** offers 24/7 free and confidential support at **1-800-273-8255**.)

Dr. Lorna M. Breen, 49, was one of thousands of New Yorkers who lost their lives to COVID-19. Her death, however, stands out for one surprising reason.

She never caught the coronavirus.

As an ER physician at a 200-bed hospital in northern Manhattan, Dr. Breen oversaw up to 170 patients at a time who tested positive for COVID-19. By early April, 59 of them had died. Those losses, combined with a grueling schedule and the trauma she witnessed, took an enormous toll on her mental health.

On April 26, she committed suicide. Prior to her experiences with COVID-19, Dr. Breen reported no prior history of mental illness or health problems.

[Dr. Breen's story](#) proves that anyone, no matter how experienced or levelheaded, can succumb to the pressure of being a caregiver during a crisis. But as tragic as it may be, her legacy serves as a reminder to caregivers at all levels that coping strategies aren't just important. They can actually save your life.

Two academic leaders from Chamberlain University—**Gilbert Singletary, PhD, JD, MBA, MSW, LCSW**, and **Janina C. Johnson, DNP, RN, CNE**—recently shared their helpful coping tips via live broadcasts. We encourage you to watch the recordings of [Dr. Singletary's](#) and [Dr. Johnson's](#) presentations in their entirety; but for now, here are four key highlights.

1. Remember that everything ends, even pandemics.

After months of social distancing and frayed nerves, it can start to feel like the upside-down world of COVID-19 is the new normal. It's not. Yes, the pandemic could last a long time and it could get worse before it gets better. But this too shall pass. In his presentation, Dr. Singletary reminds the audience to never give up on hope and to always remember the altruistic reasons we all choose to be health care professionals. Just knowing there is a light at the end of the tunnel—even if you can't see it yet—can give you the strength to press forward.



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2. Don't fight your changing emotions.

When you face an evolving crisis, your moods tend to evolve with it. [According to Dr. Singletary](#), people usually experience several phases during a crisis that impact our behavior. The “honeymoon” phase, the early stages of the crisis, is marked by feelings of harmony and individuals coming together to achieve a common goal. It’s a great feeling at the time, but it doesn’t last forever. Because soon after comes the “disillusionment” phase, where the initial high wears off and the fear and sadness of mounting tragedy starts to take a toll. At that point it’s tempting to try to will yourself back to the honeymoon phase...unfortunately, however, the brain just doesn’t work that way. You’re better off allowing yourself to experience the pain—it’s an important part of the grieving process and a path to gaining closure.

3. Be mindful of your mental state.

Mental toughness is essential for any caregiver. A seasoned nurse at a busy hospital might not even notice sights and sounds that would drive a normal person to a breakdown. Caregivers’ strength, though, underlies a hidden risk we face: Many of us have no idea what anxiety or depression feels like, and no clue when it’s time to get help. That’s why it’s vital to check your state of mind often during a crisis. Dr. Johnson recommends self-monitoring for signs and symptoms related to traumatic stress. Are you losing interest in things you used to love? Withdrawing from others? Experiencing dread or even panic attacks? Some of these mental changes can be hard to notice over time but spotting them can save a life.

4. If you need time to yourself, take it.

This isn’t to suggest you should cash in all of your vacation time during a global crisis, of course. But it’s important to remember that a burned-out caregiver is no good to anyone. If you’re feeling overwhelmed and you get an opportunity to take a break, don’t pass it up. Traumatic experiences can accelerate burnout, which was a serious problem for nurses even before the current public health situation began. [Dr. Johnson actually experienced it herself](#) before taking a short hiatus from nursing to recover. Today, she says, learning from her experience, it is crucial for health care workers to protect their mental health and well-being as a measure for preventing burnout and supporting career longevity.

Self-Care is Critical.

Dr. Singletary’s and Dr. Johnson’s presentations each have insights that every caregiver should hear. But they both share the same common theme: Self-care has never been more important for caregivers than it is right now.

You’ve cared for people your whole career, and your compassion will be what gets us through this. Just don’t forget to care for yourself too.