

## First Responders-Dealing with Stress Related to COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease) Response

It is not uncommon to experience anxiety and fear when hearing information about an infectious disease that is impacting people across the globe. The global COVID-19 pandemic is causing stress and uncertainty around the world. First Responders have the added burden of managing their own stress and their family's anxiety, as well as that of patients they are caring for in the field. Supply shortages, exposures, quarantined coworkers, increased family demands, social distancing, and economic instability are also all contributing to higher stress levels both on the job and off shift.

Although first responders understand the facts related to COVID-19 and are trained to accept a certain level of risk when on the job, the multiple levels of contributing stressors on top of the daily challenges of the job are putting our first responder community at a greater risk of trauma and stress than ever before.

It is normal to feel a range of emotions when you are part of the frontline response to COVID-19.

Emotions may include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Anger
- Somatic symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, digestive issues, and aches/pains

Everything you feel and think is normal. However, at times our feelings keep us from living our day-to-day life in a way that works for us. This can happen when our emotions impact our ability to make decisions or carry on with our activities of daily life, which can impact your performance in the field and your quality of life off shift. Anxiety is particularly challenging to feel. The symptoms of anxiety are often felt physically and they are a neurobiological response to stress. It is your body reacting to how you feel emotionally and not at all related to not being strong mentally or resilient. The good news is there are specific activities and actions that may help control what you are feeling and experiencing.

Stress management activities and actions include:

- Time with friends and family
- Hobbies
- Exercise
- Meditation
- Setting goals and working towards them
- Wearing PPE and following department protocols to avoid exposure
- Listening to music
- Time outdoors
- Taking a break from news media and social media
- Learning about COVID-19 and understanding your actual risk and how to protect yourself
- Talking to your doctor/clinic
- Reaching out to Peer Support or your Department Chaplain
- Talking to a mental health professional through EAP or calling 211

Learning the facts about COVID-19 can be the most helpful way to help alleviate anxiety and fear. Additionally, speaking to your department about how to protect yourself and your family is critical. For official personal guidance you can visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and speak to your own physician about your health, your family's health, and concerns about exposure risks. Once you educate yourself, it may be helpful to get understanding and empathy from peer support or a mental health professional who is knowledgeable about stress and emotional health and how to manage it. Reach out to your peer support team or call your EAP provider for a referral to speak to someone. For immediate and confidential support 24/7 you can also call 211. If you see a mental health professional already, this would be a good time to call and speak to them about your thoughts and feelings. Give yourself time and space to talk about how you feel anytime your thoughts and emotions become intrusive or uncomfortable. You always deserve the opportunity to explore what is on your mind and help is always available for you as a first responder.

If at any time you are thinking of suicide as a way to cope with your feelings, please reach out for help immediately. Some warning signs to be aware of include:

- Talking about or feeling hopeless, trapped or having no reason to live
- Talking or thinking about wanting to die
- Talking about or feeling unbearable pain
- Researching or planning ways to commit suicide
- Talking about or feeling like a burden to others
- Talking about or feeling a lack of belonging
- Calling people to say goodbye
- Giving away prized possessions
- Abandoning social, occupational and daily activities
- Severe and sudden changes in sleep, substance use, and mood

If any of those warning signs seem familiar, it's time to reach out for help. You have options. You could:

- Call EAP, Peer Support, or a Chaplain, visit a mental health professional, or go to the emergency room
- Call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK
- Call the Safe Call Now First Responder Helpline at 1-206-459-3020

Families of first responders are also experiencing stress related to COVID-19. Talk to your family frequently and openly about their concerns and feelings and then find answers and reassurance through your department, your physician/clinic, EAP, and/or 211.

You are on the frontline of a historic effort to provide medical care to patients around the globe to overcome COVID-19. Be patient with yourself and your family as you are called to serve during this unprecedented time.

Empowering yourself with the facts about COVID-19, using PPE and exposure precautions, and finding activities that distract you from virus news when you are off shift are all excellent ways to keep your stress levels comfortable. But if you need support, know that there is a wealth of resources, education, and support available to you as a first responder. Know that your first responder family, your department, and your community truly cares about you, and now more than ever, it is critical that you take care of yourself.

***For questions specific to your health issues please contact your doctor. If you are experiencing a medical emergency, please always call 911.***