



Delmar-Bethlehem EMS

Town of Bethlehem ~ County of Albany, New York

Self-Care During the Pandemic – March 2020

Hi. My name is Drew Anderson. I'm a clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychology at the University at Albany I'm also a riding EMT and a Lieutenant and the Director of Behavioral Health for Delmar-Bethlehem EMS

As someone with roots in both mental health and EMS, I've been asked to send out this email with some tips to help everyone get through the current crisis we're facing.

In times of crisis we tend to go into "emergency mode," ignoring our own needs until the crisis is resolved. And this strategy can work well as long as the situation is short-term- a bad call, bad shift, or even a MCI. But this is not a short-term situation. This pandemic is likely to last weeks, if not months or longer. We need a different set of strategies, ones that help us to cope with this longer-term uncertainty and stress. This email is my way of offering you a short list of the most helpful strategies to help you get through this situation.

I'm going to focus on self-care in this email. Emergency service providers are historically horrible at this, and it's often the first thing to go when we go into crisis mode. But I'll say it again- this is not a short-term crisis, it's an event that we're going to be dealing with for a while, and you need to focus on keeping yourself physically and mentally healthy so you can do the most good over the long-term. As much as we like to pretend otherwise, we're not superhuman. Fatigue, anxiety, worry, and depression affect us just like they do everyone else.

I'm going to suggest you focus on just three things to help you take care of yourself while we get through this pandemic.

First, take care of your physical self. It's all too easy to forget to eat, ignore sleep, and neglect our other basic needs. But the most important thing you can do right now is to focus on recovery. In particular, make sure you are sleeping enough. Sleep problems are common in EMS even during normal situations, and it's usually one of the first self-care habits to disappear in times of stress. But sleep deprivation makes you less effective as a provider, impairs your immune system, and makes it harder to manage emotionally. I understand that many of us may be operating with reduced staff for the foreseeable future and that patient care is still job one, but you can't beat biology. You need to recover and reset. Take naps, go to bed instead of

scrolling social media- do whatever it takes to make recovery your absolute top priority. I can't stress this highly enough. There's probably no single thing you can do to help yourself more than make sure you're getting enough sleep and recovery.

Second, and related to the first point, know when to disconnect from media (social and otherwise). It's extremely common in times of uncertainty for people to start obsessing about staying up on the latest news. It makes sense that you would want to do this- it seems like a great idea to decrease worry by increasing your information about what's going on. Unfortunately, this strategy usually backfires and actually increases worry. So, if you find that you're starting to spend hours every day scrolling social media, the CDC website, etc. looking for news or information, my recommendation is to severely limit your time doing this. Thirty minutes a couple of times a day is probably all you need to keep up to speed on current pandemic-related events. Much more than that and it's actually going to do more harm than good.

Finally, make sure to connect with others. This might seem like a contradiction with my last points, but it's not. Instead of focusing on news, use technology to keep connections with people. For many of us, social distancing means we're separated from our friends, families, and loved ones, especially when we're off duty. But maintaining connections is absolutely critical, particularly now. I've seen some ingenious uses of the internet the past few days, from people hanging out via group text and Zoom meeting to virtual movie-watching parties to one-one-one chats with loved ones living far away. Social support and a feeling of connection to others are some of the most powerful buffers for anxiety and depression; make this another priority and part of your recovery process.

That's it- three simple things: focus on physical recovery, disconnect from too much news and social media, and keep up connections with people you care about. We're all in this for the long haul and we need to make sure we're all staying as healthy and grounded as possible. These three behaviors are at least somewhat under your control, and focusing on them is one of the best ways to make sure you get through this situation.

-drew

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