

Managing Stress and Anxiety During COVID-19

During times of stress and uncertainty, it's crucial for EMS practitioners to maintain their psychological and emotional health. By staying healthy mentally, EMS practitioners can continue to be there for their communities and their families, while protecting their own well-being.

Seemingly overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic forced changes in people's lives and routines that were unthinkable just a few weeks before. Many EMS practitioners experienced the sense of loss and disorientation that so many others in the general public faced. But EMS practitioners also had to grapple with the stress of potentially being exposed to the virus during the course of doing their jobs.

Many worried about catching the virus, or about bringing it home to their loved



ones, said Lauren Young, a licensed clinical social worker who is the coordinator of the medical social work and mobile integrated health programs at

Palm Beach Fire Rescue. "It's completely understandable for EMS responders to have concerns about the unknowns related to this disease. Science is changing daily and agencies are constantly learning new things about transmission, best practices and risks associated with the disease."

Sense of Purpose

At the same time, some EMS practitioners also felt a strong sense of purpose and motivation to help. "Some felt, 'I was born to do this. I was born to take care of people. There is a storm coming but I am going to face this down,'" she said.

It's normal for EMS practitioners to feel a range of emotions during periods of stress, including fear, anger and grief. This may manifest in physical symptoms

such as a racing heart, difficulty sleeping, gastrointestinal upset or irritability.

Pandemic-related stress also has the potential to trigger or exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder.

If these feelings start to become overwhelming and interfere with the ability to work or enjoy other aspects of life, or if the negative feelings trigger substance use or suicidal thoughts, it's important to reach out for help.

"Sometimes we have to let ourselves feel these negative feelings. We cannot go above, below or beside our feelings. We have to face them head on and go through them," she said. "But when the feelings start to impact our day-to-day experience – impacting our relationships, work or causing you to drink too much or use drugs – it's important to recognize that and to get help."

Young offered these tips to EMS practitioners to cope with the stress and uncertainty of COVID-19.

Spend time with friends and family.

Connecting with others, by phone or video if necessary, can reduce anxiety and relieve symptoms of depression. "It's part of our fabric and DNA that we want to be around others. Having a phone call where you get to vent may just be exactly what you need."

Take time out for a hobby. Don't have one? Try baking, gardening or reading.

Exercise. Getting moving releases natural, mood-boosting hormones.

Meditate. Research has shown that meditation can reduce anxiety, relieve pain and actually produce measurable changes in the brain. You only need about 10 minutes a day of deep breathing and quiet focus to reap many of the benefits. There are lots of apps that offer guided meditation to help get you going.

Listen to music. Music has a powerful effect on the brain. Studies have shown



Listen to the webinar: *Managing Stress and Anxiety Through the COVID-19 Pandemic*, hosted by NAEMT and presented by Lauren Young, LCSW, is available at naemt.org. Under the "Events" tab, select "EMS Webinars & Podcasts." You will also find handouts about coping with COVID-related stress for patients and EMS personnel.

that music can lower anxiety and boost the mood.

Step outside. Soaking up the sunshine and feeling the grass or sand between your toes offers well-documented relief from symptoms of depression.

Take a break from news media and social media. "In EMS, we need to stay in the know about the virus and the news. But limit how often you check it. Try looking at the news or social media once in the morning and once at night."

Learn about COVID-19 and understand your actual risk. Understanding the disease and knowing how to protect yourself can bring a greater sense of control.

Talk to your doctor, a mental health professional or call 211. Many people are having a hard time dealing with, well... all of it. A survey by the Census Bureau found that 34% of U.S. adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression in mid-May. If you're struggling, reach out for help. 211 is available in most areas of the country and provides callers with information on mental health resources and social services.

EMS agency managers also need to make sure they are looking out for employees who are struggling, and providing resources such as employee assistance programs, peer support and family support. "Make emotional health part of your 'mission focus,'" she advised.