



*Caring for those, who care for others™*

## **COPING WITH COVID-19: GUIDELINES FOR FIRST RESPONDER FAMILIES**

### **1. Inform**

Public health messaging during a pandemic is focused on information and assurance for the public. In contrast, first responders mentally prepare by forecasting “worst case” scenarios. Though mentally helpful, it can result in a discrepancy between how first responders and their families perceive risk.

First responders while on the frontline, need to remain focused for their own health and safety. As such, it is important that concerns about the family’s health and safety are proactively addressed. Spouses should be fully informed of the inherent risk, safety measures to be undertaken, and their importance. The same should be provided when communicating to children in appropriate ways.

### **2. Precautionary measures**

Many first responder families find it helpful to take proactive, precautionary measures; that is, measures implemented in the home to mitigate potential exposure to the virus. Examples include but are not limited to cleaning routines, ensuring potentially exposed materials (e.g., uniforms, boots, lunch bags, watches) are kept out of the home, and maintaining social distancing within the home. It is helpful to make pre-arrangements should the first responder be required to enter self isolation. Arrangements may include a separate living space, such as sleeping quarters, washrooms, and meals. Prepare back-up plans in the event that one or both of you become ill or depleted.

### **3. Respite**

Throughout a pandemic first responders can anticipate being taxed both physically and emotionally. It is imperative the first responder has adequate downtime, sleep, and a healthy diet. This may include downtime upon returning home, protected sleep, nutritional foods on hand, and meals prepared before a block of shifts. For those in a relationship, spend time together as a couple, as reasonable, ensuring the time is mutually supportive. First responders should achieve balance between blocks of shifts by providing the significant other with opportunities for respite and assistance as is reasonable.

### **4. Communication**

First responder families should maintain collaborative communication appropriate to the situation. Communication while serving on the frontline may be sporadic and limited. Many families find it helpful to have a brief, 5-minute phone call during the commute home with the remainder of the drive set aside for mental respite. Parents should schedule designated time to communicate in private with additional time allocated for family communication.

In the event the first responder is involved in a situation of elevated risk, spouses, partners, and significant others appreciate being informed and reassured as soon as possible. Should precautions need to be taken in the home, inform the family as early as possible - and prior to arrival.

## 7. Clarify priorities

First responder families should be cognizant of priorities during a pandemic. Safety, security, and basic needs are of the utmost importance. Other commitments may need to be temporarily deferred. Limit media exposure to what is essential. Eliminate activities that unnecessarily increase exposure risk.

This includes non-essential activities outside the home, such as attendance at social events. It also includes inviting potentially exposed persons into your home, when other options for keeping in touch are available to avoid exposure. Regrettably, non-essential visits to family members outside the home who may be at increased risk due to age or underlying health conditions should be postponed. This is not simply to protect the core first responder family unit - it is a priority to protect others you care about from inadvertent exposure to the virus as well.

Whenever possible, exercise safe alternatives. Use online shopping and ship-to-home options when available. Limit online shopping to essential items while monitoring and curbing spending. When isolated at home, people can become inclined to increase spending on spontaneous items. When shopping in stores is essential, limit visits and take necessary precautions. Keep in contact with friends and family by telephone, text, and via online chat applications such as FaceTime and Skype.

## 8. Adapt

Focus on maintaining a healthy outlook and resiliency for yourself and your family. Adapt to the fullest extent possible. Despite social distancing, many options remain for upholding a healthy diet, exercise, and fulfilling lifestyle. Additional guidelines are provided to follow this document to help in these areas.

First responders may incur unanticipated end-of-shift overtime, scheduling changes, and may be unable to help at home due to isolation requirements. Focus on shared resolution and mutual support. The division of responsibilities at home is unlikely to be 50/50 during a pandemic but this is temporary - even if for an extended duration.

## 9. Coparent

The focus should be on coparenting, regardless of whether your family is united or separated. Be consistent and developmentally appropriate in your explanation of the pandemic to children, parenting approaches, and adherence to measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Set aside conflict entirely or until a much later time - if possible, after the pandemic has resolved and all have had an opportunity for rest and recuperation. This is a time to work together.

## 5. Appreciation

Creating a supportive family environment and helping it to flourish is a two-way street - a responsibility shared by all members of the family. First responders should demonstrate they value the contributions, role, and sacrifices made by those they care about. Similarly, spouses, partners, and significant others should value first responders for serving our community and their efforts to support the family.

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