



Caring for those, who care for others™

COPING WITH COVID-19: GUIDELINES FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

1. Reach out before you hit the wall

As frontline first responders, we are driven in service to our communities and to help those in need. We have a remarkable capacity to run on empty and put others before ourselves. While we know that we ought to care for ourselves, often there seems to be a situation more urgent than our own, someone who needs us more than we need ourselves, or perhaps it might feel selfish or burdensome.

Running on empty is a survival strategy but not a sustainable strategy. It is the most assured way to hit your wall - reaching a point where you can no longer effectively function in your role. You must care for yourself along the way, within reason, given the multiple demands upon you.

2. Be proactive

Schedule “check-ins” on a regular basis - they might require as little as 15 minutes each day. Acute stress reactions are rooted in a physical response to stress. Early intervention can help sustain your health and functioning so you can better perform your role. Do so with a mental health professional versed in first responder mental health, pandemics, and early intervention. Your role on the frontline places unique responsibilities and demands upon you. The person you lean on for support needs to fundamentally understand the implications of life on the frontline.

3. Protected sleep

It’s a myth that going to bed overtired results in better sleep. It leads to reduced restorative sleep and more awakenings. This increases your fatigue and it becomes a vicious cycle in which fatigue becomes progressively worse. A related issue is feeling “wired” when sleep deprived. This does not mean you are flourishing on minimal sleep, rather it’s an indicator that you’re grossly overtired.

To the fullest extent possible, set aside protected sleep time. Practice sleep hygiene (e.g., room darkening blinds, white noise, disable non-essential phone alerts). Educate families that sleep is a safety issue, not a luxury. Consider proactive pharmacological intervention to prevent over exhaustion. Options might include sleep aids suitable for shift workers and anti-anxiety medication to calm your thoughts. Avoid stimulants or “uppers” unless prescribed.

4. Stay abreast of developments

There is potential for some to succumb to the gravity of the situation, developing a sense of impending doom and forecasting worse things to come. This is rooted in factors such as catastrophizing, negative thinking, and a sense of helplessness or inability to substantially impact outcomes. Maintain your forward focus and growth mindset. Stay apprised of evolving evidence, best practices, and progressive developments in the field. Be sharply focused on your target - the preservation of life - while remaining grounded in realistic expectations.

5. Direct exposure

Depending on the situation and your role on the frontline, it is possible you may be offered the option to participate in a site visit for informational purposes. It is important to be honest with yourself as to the impact this will have upon you. For some people, a site visit provides a clearer perspective to inform their role and operational decision making. However, for others it can be both physically and psychologically detrimental. Before this decision is made, please carefully consider the value specific to your role and the potential impact upon you. Similarly, limit your media exposure to what is essential for the effective delivery of your role.

6. Stay connected

It is important to stay connected during a pandemic, despite the fact your available time is limited. Focus connectedness on those who truly understand and support your role, those with shared comprehension of the situation at hand, and those closest to you.

It is common to feel torn between your duties related to the pandemic and concerns for the wellbeing and safety of your loved ones. Address your concerns about your loved ones to the fullest extent reasonable and feasible so that you can best focus on your role.

Create balance by ensuring you have quiet time to focus on relaxation, groundedness, and reflection. Outlets such as yoga, deep breathing, and meditation are not merely niceties - they can be helpful in directly countering acute and sustained stress reactions.

If you need to self isolate, access a mental health professional who provides services via webcam. This ensures support while upholding community measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

7. Public behaviour

Public behaviour during a pandemic, such as resource hoarding, can be very disturbing to us as first responders. We understand the most vulnerable in our communities are often limited in their ability to gather resources whether due to medical conditions, mobility limitations, transportation barriers, or reduced income. When the vulnerable are limited in their access to essential resources, their susceptibility to the virus increases, and consequently their propensity to spread the virus as well.

Humans are driven by an innate instinct to survive, which increases exponentially under certain conditions such as fear and the perceived threat of resource loss. Human behaviour can become predictably irrational in a frantic attempt to increase one's odds of survival. Remember that this is a survival mechanism gone awry and typically does not reflect the personality or values of the individual.

Our core value is to help those in need. We are fortunate that we thrive amidst stress and adversity, but this is not commonplace. It makes us unique and propels us in our drive to help others. Your selflessness in service to others is remarkable and you are making a positive impact in our world.

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