

5 ways first responders can focus on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

Tips to ensure first responders stay not only physically healthy but also mentally prepared to navigate these stressful times

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By Nick Halmasy

Right now, regardless of where you are, we are all experiencing the same unprecedented times.

COVID-19 has hit in a way that many of us likely didn't think it would. Widespread fear trickling into every facet of our lives, from work to social life to the purchasing of toilet paper.



First responders on the front lines are dealing with increased pressure, heightened stress and certainly new risks during this situation. (Photo by John Nacion/STAR MAX/IPx 2020)

First responders on the front lines are dealing with increased pressure, heightened stress and certainly new risks during this situation. And less-than-stellar coping skills aren't going to get you

through this one. With that in mind, first responders can employ the following five strategies to help offset the stress.

1. CHECK-IN WITH YOURSELF AND OTHERS

It is important to check-in, more often than usual, with yourself or others. Identify and acknowledge any stress responses that you may be experiencing and move to navigate those effectively.

These are unknown times, but certainly as first responders, we are at a heightened risk of getting sick. This should be a concern for us, but check to ensure that this doesn't slowly become a mental health concern. Such changes aren't something we readily acknowledge as mental health-related responses. Check for those red flags – increased irritability, tiredness (over and above what you would normally feel), loss of appetite, withdrawing more from friends and family, bouts of anger, edginess, etc.

2. MAINTAIN A CARE PLAN TO STAY HEALTHY

Engaging in effective, non-avoidant styles of coping with our stress is adaptive and helpful (both short term and long term).

Eating well, moving your body (outside your work expectations) and connecting with loved ones or friends is important in times when isolation is not only easy, but recommended. Additionally, many therapists and programs offer phone/Skype-style approaches during these times.

Routines can be important to cope. Try to identify if you notice any changes in how you care for yourself or others. If routines are disrupted and self-care begins to slide, these could be red flags of other problems that need to be addressed.

3. STAY CONNECTED TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Isolation outside of work is recommended. Therefore, the need for social interaction is going to be heightened, and we may all feel the cabin fever creeping in. Luckily, we can stay connected virtually. This, of course, is not as good or effective in value as face-to-face interactions, but, where possible, these virtual connections can serve as a surrogate.

Engaging with friends, forums or other online platforms can help you gain some semblance of social interactions. These are also great times to connect like the “good ol’ days” with your family and maybe even engage with them face to face instead of diving into TV binge-watching or burying our heads in our phones and tablets.

4. EXPECT STRESS AND KEEP IT AT BAY

We are used to going on calls that have the “unknown” factor, but we now have a very real risk of facing COVID-19. For most of us, this will feel like the flu. But obviously, this is a large danger for certain population groups and therefore will also be devastating.

There is little challenging in the way of cognitive restructuring (fancy terms for challenging our thoughts) because the worry we have for this threat is real, and perhaps imminent. But this doesn't mean we can't do anything about it.

Try not to get too lost in the sheer work volume during these times. Pay attention to how you are responding, and take advantage of personal tools, partners and any options organizationally you have to take breaks to gain some mental currency back.

Keeping stress at bay is difficult – and certainly impossible to remove all or most of it. But this doesn't mean that we should stop trying.

5. BE PROACTIVE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Don't wait until things are really bad to seek help or support. Seek it soon. Right now if you have to. The cost of waiting is always greater in the long run. It is much easier to navigate the start of stress-related concerns when they are fresh and new than to repair and heal from stresses that have not only already cut, but scarred and calloused as well.

These are new times, so we can approach this problem in a new way. Proactively seek out those things that you know will help you navigate the stress, healthily, sooner than later. MAKE TIME.

There is always a sacrifice that is made here, but that doesn't need to be a negative. Sacrificing 30 minutes of TV for a 30-minute run is not a net negative, and the benefits of foregoing TV and adding exercise can do wonders for our brains.

Helping us decompress after a hard day can, paradoxically, require doing something hard. Sometimes every atom and molecule and synapse will tell you otherwise. Fighting against that urge is a pursuit worth engaging. In psychobabble, this is called "acting opposite," and it could be the very tool that keeps you from falling prey to stresses negative impacts. And exercise isn't the only tool here – hobbies, skills, and other activities that bring joy and passion are helpful to overcome those daily stresses.

EFFECTIVE COPING SKILLS MATTER

This is a unique time in our history, when the increases in work stress may be far more significant than past experiences. The squeeze from the changes in policies, procedures, organizational pressures, let alone the normal day-to-day challenges all binding against you. But that doesn't mean we should let it.

Practice effective and adaptive coping strategies to bolster your ability to navigate these tough times. Being consistent with these skills, being proactive with self-examination, and trying to maintain as best as possible normality in your day to day life can help offset the stresses of the job.

A version of this article originally appeared on AftertheCall.org.

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