

Stress Management for Emergency Responders Exposed to COVID-19

We are all currently experiencing a high-stress event (any incident that causes persons to experience unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to interfere with their ability to function). The coronavirus pandemic affects all in some form or fashion.

You may now be experiencing or may experience later, some intense reactions of many types. It is very common, and somewhat normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have experienced an event such as this.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or reactions) appear immediately after the high-stress event. However, they may appear a few hours or a few days later. In some instances, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and signals of a high-stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months but may occasionally longer depending on the severity of the event.

With the understanding and the support of those close to you, the stress reactions usually pass quicker. Sometimes, the high-stress event is so intense that you may need to seek professional help. It does not suggest craziness or weakness. It merely suggests that this particular high-stress event was challenging for you to manage on your own.

Common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

Cognitive: Confusion, nightmares, uncertainty hypervigilance, suspiciousness, intrusive images blaming someone poor problem solving poor abstract thinking poor attention/decisions poor concentration/ memory, disorientation of time, place or person difficulty identifying objects or people heightened or lowered alertness increased or decreased awareness of surroundings, etc.

Emotional: fear, guilt, grief, panic, denial, anxiety, agitation, irritability, depression, intense anger, apprehension, emotional shock, emotional outbursts, feeling overwhelmed, lack of emotional control, and inappropriate emotional response, etc.

Behavioral: Withdrawal, antisocial acts, inability to rest, intensified pacing, erratic movements, change in social activity change in speech patterns, loss or increase of appetite, hyperalert to the environment, increased alcohol consumption, and change in usual communications, etc.

The **Alabama Law Enforcement Alliance for Peer Support (ALLEAPS)** is a non-agency affiliated program to offer free, peer-based, *totally privileged, and confidential* (Alabama Statute 36-21-14) communication between emergency responders.

Toll-Free Number (833) 219-2461

www.alleaps.org

Ways for You to respond to the Stress Reaction

- You are normal, and you are having a normal reaction to something you didn't expect – this very abnormal situation: don't label yourself crazy, you are a normal person reacting to an abnormal event!
- Periods of physical exercise (running, walking, etc.) interchanged with relaxation will decrease some of the physical reactions you may experience.
- Structure your time by keeping busy and normalizing your schedule as much as possible.
- Talk to trusted friends and loved ones. Talk is helpful when dealing with a high-stress event.
- Beware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs, alcohol, sugar, and caffeine. Avoid self-medication.
- Reach out. People do care.
- Spend time with others as possible.
- Help others who are impacted as much as possible by sharing your thoughts and checking on them to see how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel bad and share feelings with others.
- Keep a journal. Write your way through those difficult times or sleepless hours.
- Realize that those around you are under stress, too!
- Delay any significant life changes for a minimum of six months.
- Make as many daily decisions as possible This helps give a sense of control during this tough time.
- Get plenty of rest: monitor fatigue and energy levels.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal at first – don't try to fight them. They should decrease over time and become less painful. If these continue for several weeks, seek professional help.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).
- Use anxiety/stress reduction techniques frequently.
- Spiritual support is helpful if it is relevant to you.

Ways for You, Friends, And Loved ones can help!

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with them if possible, or at least contact them (calls, text, Facetime, etc.).
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, and taking care of children.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.

- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" –people who experience high-stress events are not comforted by such statements. Instead, tell them you are sorry such an event has occurred, and you want to understand and assist them.
- If necessary, consider contacting the ALLEAPS Peer Support hotline for peer support.