

# COVID-19 and Healthcare Responder Stress

## Healthcare Responder Stress

Healthcare responders are at higher than average risk for traumatic stress reactions because their work repeatedly exposes them to highly stressful situations. During a COVID-19 outbreak in Minnesota, you may experience far greater than average stress.

- You may face conflicting demands between work and family responsibilities.
- Have fear of about contagion/spreading illness.
- Feel constant pressure to keep working along with a sense of ineffectiveness.
- Experience stigma (from community, co-workers, friends, and family).
- Experience isolation from family, friends, co-workers and community support systems.
- Have concerns about the health and wellbeing of yourself, your family and loved ones.
- You may not want to leave work when your shift is finished – regardless of whether your replacement has arrived.
- You will likely try to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment, and you may deny the need for rest and recovery time.

Regardless, you will not be untouched by the enormous gravity of the situation and you will experience sadness, grief, and/or anger. As a healthcare responder, you need to become fully informed about the impact that such an event may have on you personally and professionally, and how to protect yourself.

## The Stress Cycle

Stress elevates arousal or readiness. Within manageable levels, stress can help sharpen your attention and help you to cope with threatening situations. However, when stress arousal reaches maximum effect, the gain in performance is lost and your performance and health begin to deteriorate. If your stress response is active for a long period of time, it can damage your cardiovascular, immune and nervous systems. Long-term exposure to stress can also create new, or worsen existing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse.

## Recognize Your Stress Reactions

The following list of common reactions is provided to help you recognize and monitor your stress level during a COVID-19 response.

### Physical Reactions

- Rapid heart rate, palpitations, muscle tension, headaches, tremors, gastrointestinal distress, nausea, inability to relax when off duty, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, nightmares or flashbacks.

### Emotional Reactions

- Fear or terror in life-threatening situations or perceived danger, anger, frustration, argumentativeness, irritability, deep sadness, difficulty maintaining emotional balance.

### Cognitive Reactions

- Disorientation or confusion, difficulty problem-solving and making decisions, difficulty remembering instructions, inability to see situations clearly, distortion and misinterpretation of comments and events.

### Behavioral Reactions

- Unnecessary risk-taking, failure to use personal protective equipment, refusal to follow orders or leave the scene, endangerment of team members, increased use or misuse of prescription drugs or alcohol.

### Interpersonal Reactions

- Irritability, anger and hostility, blaming, reduced ability to support teammates, conflicts with peers or family, withdrawal, isolation.

## Implement Organizational Stress Management Policies

- Limit working hours to no longer than 12-hour shifts.
- Utilize teams and limit amount of time staff work alone.
- Provide emotional defusing and assess responder functioning after each shift
- Nurture team support:
  - Create a buddy system.
  - Encourage breaks away from the scene.
  - Promote a positive atmosphere of support and tolerance.

## Practice Personal Stress Management

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Be careful not to identify too much with survivors/victims' grief and trauma.
- Reduce physical tension by deep breathing, meditating, walking.
- Take brief breaks for basic bodily care and refreshment.
- Maintain a healthy diet and get adequate sleep and exercise.
- Avoid or limit caffeine and use of alcohol.
- Realize that it is okay to draw boundaries and say "no."
- Talk with your co-workers about experiences; get and give support to one another.
- Ask for help if you need it.
- Access the Disaster Distress Helpline at: 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to talk to a trained crisis counselor.

Includes material from the SAMHSA (2019) "Tips for Disaster Responders: Preventing and Managing Stress."

Minnesota Department of Health  
Center for Emergency Preparedness and Response  
625 Robert Street, N  
PO Box 64975  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
651-201-5700  
[nancy.j.carlson@state.mn.us](mailto:nancy.j.carlson@state.mn.us)  
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/ep/behavioral/index.html>

02/26/2020