

Mental health support for first responders during the COVID-19 pandemic

Firefighters, emergency medical personnel, police officers and other first responders continue to face challenging, dangerous and debilitating situations as they protect our local and national security. Helping people with death, grief, pain and loss combined with infection, long working hours, poor sleep, physical exertion and lack of time to recover between traumatic events can lead to a wide range of mental health problems for first responders.

First responders are always on the front line facing highly stressful and risky calls. Due to the rapid pace of their work, it can be difficult to process and manage what has happened, which can lead to depression, stress and post-traumatic stress symptoms, suicidal ideation and other behavioral health conditions. Here are some practical tips to help first responders understand how to recognize and manage burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

What are burnout and secondary traumatic stress?

Burnout refers to feelings of extreme exhaustion and overexertion from what one does and experiences, typically over a long period of time. Secondary traumatic stress consists of reactions and symptoms resulting from contact with another person's traumatic experience, not direct contact with a traumatic event.

Signs of burnout and secondary traumatic stress

Burnout

- Feeling tired, exhausted or overwhelmed
- Feeling sadness, depression or apathy
- Getting easily frustrated
- Blaming others for small things, irritability
- Lacking feelings, indifference
- Diminishing self-care (hygiene)
- Isolation or separation from others
- Feeling like a failure, nothing you do can help, you don't do your job well or you need alcohol/other drugs to deal with it

Secondary traumatic stress

- Excessively worrying or being scared about something bad happening
- Becoming easily startled or "on guard" all the time
- Showing physical signs of stress such as a racing heart
- Having nightmares or recurrent thoughts about the traumatic situation
- Feeling that the trauma of others belongs to you

Coping techniques

- Remember that it is not selfish to take breaks; the needs of survivors are no more important than your own needs and constant work can prevent you from making your best contribution.
- Limitation of working time to 12-hour shifts.
- Take care of yourself by eating a healthy diet, exercising and avoiding excessive consumption of substances.
- Use the buddy system to support each other. Monitor each other's stress, workload and safety.
- Talk to family, friends, supervisors and teammates about your feelings and experiences.
- Practice breathing and relaxation techniques.

Thank you for helping our cities, towns and country—your selflessness and heroism are inspiring.

Help is available. Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

Sources:

- "Emergency Responders: Tips for Taking Care of Yourself." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 19 Mar. 2018, emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp.
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