

CONNECTIONS

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FIRST RESPONDER FOCUS

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

By Nick Halmasy, FireRescue1.com (Reprinted with permission of FireRescue1.com ©2020)

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. 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.



Hello City Employees,

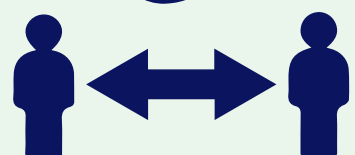
This month we wanted to provide you with tools to work remotely and improve your mental health during this time of stress and uncertainty.

In this edition you will find Tips for Dealing with the Stress of Uncertainty, Tips for Supervising Remotely, and Tips for Working Remotely.

Finally, we have wanted to provide first responders with some ways to focus in their mental health during this pandemic.

We hope that you all are doing well and staying safe.

~ The EAP Team



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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 rather 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 the negative impacts of stress. 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 are 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.

LEADERSHIP *Matters*

Tips for Supervising Remotely

By Arlyn Gonzalez, LCSW, MSW, EAP Specialist

The current health crisis has changed the way you manage your team, whether your employees are reporting to the job site or working from home. This month, we are offering some tips to supervisors, managers, and lead workers who are primarily supervising remotely. While we don't know how long this will continue, here are some ways to communicate and engage with your staff so that everyone is kept in the loop.

1. Check-in with employees constantly and with different platforms

- Establish a consistent check-in schedule so that employees know what to expect and are not interrupted in their workflow.
- Check in with your remote employees daily.
 - » Depending on the size of your department it may be one-on-one calls, group check-ins, or daily emails.
- Emails are not a sufficient form of communication on their own, try to use video conferencing as often as you can.
- This is a great opportunity for you to share information with your employees and for each employee's concerns/voice to be heard.

2. Establish guidelines for engaging

- Get your employees' feedback, this should be a collaborative process.
- Establish each individual's preferences about how and when to communicate. For example:
 - » If you need to reach me immediately, call me.
 - » I will send daily emails at the beginning of the day and once a week we will have a video based meeting.
- Don't be afraid to use technology to enrich virtual communication.
 - » Use emojis or GIFs in emails, but use them appropriately.



3. Facilitate small talk and get creative with virtual gatherings

- Use ice breakers or have specific questions ready at the beginning of each meeting.
 - » How was your weekend?
- Encourage opportunities to engage virtually outside of work meetings.
 - » Have a virtual lunch.
- Remember to celebrate special occasions.
 - » Birthdays!

4. Set clear expectations about work and accountability

- Make sure everyone is on the same page about what projects will look like, who will do what and what your expectations are.
- Set hard deadlines.

5. Trust and encourage employees

- Check in with employees about how remote work is going for them. Listen and support them in working from home.
- Encourage remote working by providing positive feedback.
- Although you may not be able to see your employees working, trust that they are. Focus on the goals being met and not micromanaging what they are doing throughout the day.

6. Don't forget about your employees' goals

- Provide opportunities to develop professionally.
 - » Many trainings have gone virtual.
- Ask your employees what their goals are within the agency and related to their professional career.

CISM Resources for Managers

CISM services are not counseling or therapy but a system of services in which the normal recovery process to abnormal events are facilitated through individual or group debriefings. It is important that all departments respond to a critical incident and that employees involved in the incident receive the referral or offer of these services in a timely manner. The number one factor in an employee's ability to recover from a critical incident is the amount of support they perceive from the organization.

What is your role in handling a critical incident?

How will you coordinate support for those involved if an incident occurs in your department?

For more information, we offer the following resources:

- ✦ **Critical Incidents: A Guide for Managers** in the May 2017 issue of *Connections*
- ✦ **Critical Incident Response for Managers Checklist** available on the **EAP website**

EAP staff are available to help you at each step in the process, just call 266-6561 with any questions.

Note: COVID-19 is not preventing an appropriate response to critical incidents. EAP staff are consulting by phone and conducting individual or group debriefings via Zoom.



Tips for Working Remotely

By Arlyn Gonzalez, LCSW, MSW, EAP Specialist

The pandemic has changed the way we all spend our free time, socialize, communicate, and work. For some employees who have been physically going into work it has meant re-thinking how to safely do their jobs. For others, it has been learning how to effectively work remotely which has had advantages and challenges. As we may continue to work remotely for an undetermined amount of time, below are some tips to assist in effectively working from home and communicating with each other.

1. **Find a setup that works for you**
 - Find a space or multiple spaces that works for your needs. Remember that you can get creative where working from home.
 - » Work from your patio or balcony.
 - Create routines for the beginning and end of your day.
 - » Start your day with a cup of coffee.
 - » End your day by shutting off your computer and checking your voicemail.
2. **Create boundaries**
 - Set a schedule and stick to it.
 - Schedule breaks.
 - Find work/life balance by disconnecting from work when your work day ends.
 - Set ground rules with other people in your space.
3. **Communicate clearly, often, and effectively**
 - Ask clarifying questions.
 - Don't hesitate to voice your preference and ask your supervisor for things that you need to work effectively.
 - Reiterate what you will do after a meeting or what part of a project you will focus on. It is easy to have a misunderstanding on what will occur.
4. **Be accountable for your workload**
 - Set goals for your day.
 - Find ways to organize yourself that work for you.
 - » Have a to-do-list. You can use the OneNote or Sticky Notes on your laptop.
 - » Keep your calendar up to date.
 - » Block times to complete tasks.
5. **Be visible at work**
 - Prepare for meetings.
 - Attend meetings on time.
 - Take notes.
 - Don't multitask.
 - » Focus on the meeting or task at hand.
 - » Turn off notifications for your phone.
 - Speak up and make sure that your voice is heard.
6. **Remember your goals**
 - Find and ask for permission to attend training opportunities or webinars.
7. **Find ways to socialize with your colleagues**
 - By nature, we crave interaction although the level will vary by individual. Find out how much interaction you need and how to acquire that virtually.
 - Check in with your co-workers.
 - » Have conversations via chat or emails with others.
8. **Take care of yourself**
 - Use your benefit time for days off!
 - Allow yourself to take a break and decompress. It is easy to burn out considering everything that is occurring in the world.
 - Leave your house at least once a day.



Source: career karma.com

The Great Unknown: 10 Tips for Dealing with the Stress of Uncertainty

by American Psychological Association

Most people are creatures of habit. When things go as planned, we feel in control. But when life throws a curveball, it can leave us feeling anxious and stressed. At this time, Americans have many reasons to feel uncertain related to their health, the economy, education, and governmental response to COVID-19. Additionally, APA's **2020 Stress in America Survey** has revealed that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by the stress of the pandemic and report racial discrimination as a significant source of stress. Research shows that people react differently to uncertainty, and that those with a higher intolerance for uncertainty may be less resilient and more prone to low mood, negative or down feelings, and anxiety.

No one can avoid the unexpected. But these simple steps can help you better face life's uncertainties.

Be kind to yourself.

Some people are better at dealing with uncertainties than others, so don't beat yourself up if your tolerance for unpredictability is lower than a friend's. Remind yourself that it might take time for the stressful situation to resolve, and be patient with yourself in the meantime.

Reflect on past successes.

Chances are you've overcome stressful events in the past—and you survived! Give yourself credit. Reflect on what you did during that event that was helpful and what you might like to do differently this time.

Develop new skills.

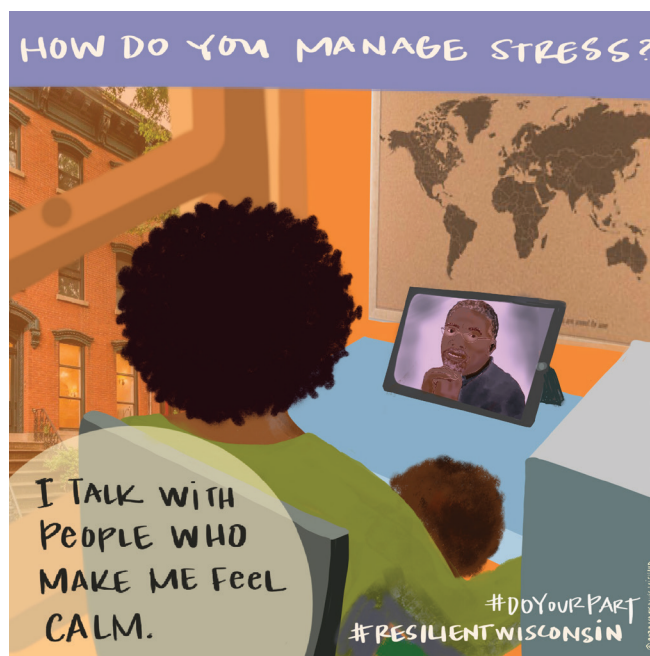
When life is relatively calm, make a point to try things outside your comfort zone. From standing up to a difficult boss to trying a new sport, taking risks helps you develop confidence and skills that come in handy when life veers off course.

Limit exposure to news.

When we're stressed about something, it can be hard to look away. But compulsively checking the news only keeps you wound up. Try to limit your check-ins and avoid the news during vulnerable times of day, such as right before bedtime.

Avoid dwelling on things you can't control.

When uncertainty strikes, many people immediately imagine worst-case scenarios. Get out of the habit of ruminating on negative events.



Take your own advice.

Ask yourself: If a friend came to me with this worry, what would I tell them? Imagining your situation from the outside can often provide perspective and fresh ideas.

Engage in self-care.

Don't let stress derail your healthy routines. Make efforts to eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. Many people find stress release in practices such as yoga and meditation.

Seek support from those you trust.

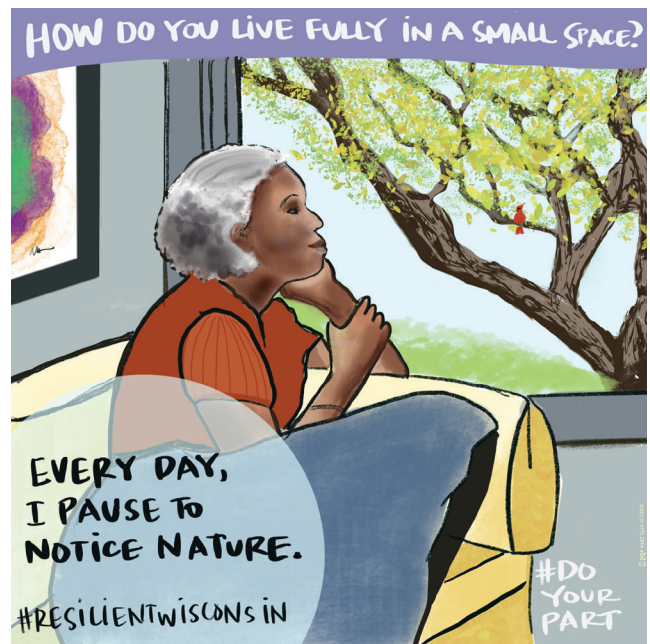
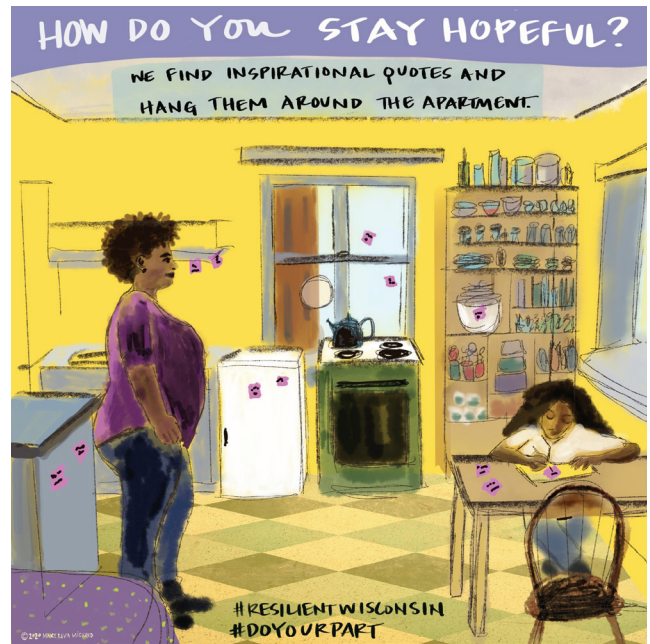
Many people isolate themselves when they're stressed or worried. But social support is important, so reach out to family and friends.

Control what you can.

Focus on the things that are within your control, even if it's as simple as weekly meal planning or laying out your clothes the night before a stressful day. Establish routines to give your days and weeks some comforting structure.

Ask for help.

If you're having trouble managing stress and coping with uncertainty on your own, ask for help. Psychologists are experts in helping people develop healthy ways to cope with stress. Find a psychologist in your area by using **APA's Psychologist Locator Service**.



*Thanks for reading,
 we hope you found the information useful!*

You can reach any of us by calling the EAP Office at (608) 266-6561

**External Available 24/7:
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- Arlyn Gonzalez, agonzalez@cityofmadison.com
Provides bilingual EAP services in English and Spanish
- Sherri Amos, samos@cityofmadison.com

To learn more about your external EAP services, please contact FEI at 1-800-236-7905 or log on to feieap.com and type username: madison.