



Fact Sheet on Coping with COVID-19 for Public Safety Personnel (PSP)

Responding to COVID-19 can be both rewarding and stressful. It is only natural to experience fear and anxiety in response to this unprecedented situation. Sources of stress may include witnessing human suffering, risk of personal harm, intense workload, life-and-death decisions, and separation from family. Stress prevention and management is critical for PSP to stay healthy and continue in the efforts to manage this critical situation. There are effective coping strategies that PSP can do before, during, and after responding to the critical incident.

Things to consider when responding to COVID-19:

- Acknowledge that Secondary Traumatic Stress (a.k.a., Vicarious Trauma) can impact anyone after a traumatic event.
- Learn the common psychological reactions to stress including physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and spiritual symptoms.
- Allow time for you and your family to recover from responding to the pandemic.
- Create a list of personal self-care activities that you enjoy, such as being active, reading a book, connecting with friends and family.
- Take a break from media coverage of COVID-19, including social media.
- Ask for help if you feel overwhelmed or concerned that COVID-19 is affecting your ability to respond in your operational role or to take care for your family as you did before the outbreak.

Things to Try During a Response:

- Know your personal signs of stress.
- Identify the major stressors.
- Create a team culture and a buddy system where you can choose to spend off-duty time being active, relaxing, or talking together.
- Take time for yourself where you can disengage from operations.
- Choose constructive ways you can release stress: choose physical activities that can be done safely while on deployment such as walking, stretching, meditating, taking deep breaths, reading or listening to music that is timed to your breath.
- Practice healthy sleep behaviours: train your body to downshift by establishing a consistent sleep routine.
- Remember 22 minutes of physical activity before rest will facilitate a more restorative rest period.

Signs of Stress to Look Out for in Yourself and Others:

- Sadness, depression, or apathy.
- Easily frustrated, shortened fuse.
- Blaming others, irritability.
- Lacking feelings, indifferent.
- Poor self-care (hygiene).
- Tired, exhausted or overwhelmed.
- Feeling like: a failure, helpless, not doing your job well, you need alcohol or other drugs to cope.

Signs of Secondary Trauma:

- Excessive worry or fear about something bad happening.
- Easily startled, or “on-guard” all the time (hyper startle and hypervigilant).
- Physical signs of stress (e.g., racing heart rate).
- Nightmares or recurrent thoughts about the traumatic situation.
- Feeling others’ traumatic circumstances as if they are your own.

Social Conflicts:

- Irritability towards others.
- Anger and Hostility.
- Blaming others.
- Reduced ability to support teammates.
- Conflicts with peers or family.
- Withdrawal.
- Isolation.

Responder Self-Care Techniques:

- Limit working hours to set healthy limits for overtime and extra duties.
- Work in teams and limit amount of time working alone.
- Write in a journal.
- Talk to family, friends, supervisors, and teammates about how you are impacted by events.
- Practice breathing and relaxation techniques (Helps to stabilize the nervous system).
- Maintain a healthy diet and get adequate sleep and physical activity.
- Know that it is okay to draw boundaries and say “no”.
- Avoid or limit caffeine and use of alcohol.

It is Important to remind yourself:

- It is not selfish to take a break.
- The needs of the general public are not more important than your own needs and wellbeing.
- Working all of the time does not mean you will make your best contribution.
- There are other people who can help in the response.

Responding to disasters can be both rewarding and stressful. Knowing that you have stress and coping with it as you respond will help you stay well and will allow you to keep helping those who are affected.

Adapted from SAMHSA & CDC. For more information go to: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp> <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-and-Managing-Stress/SMA14-4873> ; <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada.html> ; <https://www.who.int> ; <https://cmha.ca>

If you, or someone you care about, are feeling overwhelmed with emotions like sadness, depression, or anxiety, or feel like you want to harm yourself or others call:

- 911
- Access your local CISM Team
- Activate ACIPN 24/7 Toll-Free #: 1-833-894-2476
- Alberta Health Links: 811
- Canadian Suicide Prevention Crisis Line 24/7: 1-833-456-4566
- CMHA Distress Line (Edmonton Region): 780-482-4357 (HELP)
- Distress Centre 24/7 (Calgary Region): 403-266-4357 (HELP)

The Alberta Critical Incident Provincial Network is a point of contact for public safety personnel to access, enable, or activate a peer support response for individuals or groups. Our 24/7 call-centre can receive requests, evaluate need, and activate peers in real-time. To activate a peer support response any individual, crew, or department can call the toll-free number: **1-833-894-2476** (CISM) 24/7/365.