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PHASE I OF THE NEW NORMAL

Dealing with the Psychological Aspects of a Pandemic Event because of the Coronavirus (COVID 19)

Dealing with a public health emergency which results in being quarantined can create a variety of emotions for you and your family. These types of emergencies can be particularly stressful and intense as you are tasked with taking care of yourself and your loved ones while managing job responsibilities. By preparing and understanding common reactions, you will be more equipped to cope with competing priorities and the common effects of experiencing a public health emergency. If the emergency goes on for an especially long period of time or you are required to quarantine, your stress responses can be more intense than you are accustomed to experiencing. The following information is intended to a) identify some of the specific reactions you may experience and b) identify specific coping techniques for each of the expected reactions:

Information Overload-Due to ongoing traditional media and social media coverage. The overload can also be exacerbated by constant discussions with family members, friends or co-workers. This information overload can cause you or your family members to start anticipating and worrying about the next news report or update as it relates to your health or even survival. This will often leave you and your family feeling on edge and hypervigilant.

○ **Intervention Options**

- Limit your media exposure in terms of frequency, duration and time of day.
- Don't contaminate yourself with negative information before sleeping or other relaxing events.
- Limit your viewing to only balanced sites that you trust, and reputable scientific sources such as the CDC guidelines.
- When you start experiencing sensory overload from either watching or listening to negative information, switch to positive or relaxing watching or listening.

Sleep Disturbances-Sleep disturbances, including nightmares and/or difficulty falling/staying asleep are common stress or trauma reactions.

○ **Intervention Options**

- Don't lay in bed and obsess about the events or the bad dreams
- Write about the distressing event and/or the nightmare in as much detail as you can. Writing about an event can assist the brain in processing through what happened and may alert you to negative self-talk (I should have done x; what if y, etc.) Becoming aware of unproductive thought patterns gives you the opportunity to make changes.



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- Engage in a sleep routine prior to going to bed that is relaxing. Spend at least 15-20 minutes engaging in quiet activities (e.g. brushing your teeth, reading an entertaining book, stretching, meditating, etc.)
- **Increased emotionality**-Increased anger, emotional outburst, and/or general irritability with others are also common. Another problem that can develop is that you start to focus on micro-stimuli instead of macro-stimuli. So instead of focusing on the task at hand you become distracted by little things such as your partner or actions by other people. These emotions, if not controlled, can lead to free floating anger, anxiety, feelings of despair, hopelessness, and helplessness.
 - **Intervention Options**
 - Try to avoid alcohol-while alcohol may temporarily make you feel better and allow you to disengage, substance use can worsen anger responses and can add to problems at home and in your personal/professional relationships.
 - Stay in contact with your support system or your points of contact during a quarantine.
 - During ongoing emergencies, you may not have time to process emotions. So, you may find that the emotions will occur once the danger has completely passed or you have time to unwind.
 - Stress and trauma reactions tend to be more severe when you feel personally unsafe or helpless to assist yourself or your family. Stay connected with your family members, your community or your support systems.
 - Understand that your role during this public health emergency may be different than anything you have done before, and this may cause additional stress. Acknowledge that this is normal.
 - Separation from family and friends will likely exacerbate your worries. If possible, periodically check-in with at least one member of your family. Note that communication abilities may decrease or even be impossible, so if your family is unreachable, do not allow your mind to go to worst-case scenarios.
- **Shattering of both your and your family's assumptions of safety and wellbeing**-We all have assumptions about the world and our lives. These assumptions can be things like 'my kids are safe at school and nothing bad can happen there, 'movie theaters are safe places' or 'I am safe in my community from public health emergencies. When these assumptions become shattered you must make a choice to engage in denial (it won't be that bad), psychologically deteriorate into feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, avoid the situation by focusing on a specific task, or developing a 'New Normal'



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- **Intervention Options**
 - In order to survive we all must engage in a bit of ‘Denial’ for example with all of the school shootings you need to assume that the school has a good safety protocol otherwise you would never let your children leave home
 - In dealing with public health emergencies you must develop the ‘New Normal’ in which you assume they can and will occur, but you will have coping plans for you and your family.
 - If you can’t develop a good coping strategy for you and your family, it may be time to re-evaluate your lifestyle.
 - Respond to the public health emergency as if you are a survivor not a victim-This means that you need to utilize all your coping resources. You wouldn’t judge yourself for needing a doctor’s assistance resetting a broken bone so don’t judge yourself if you need assistance resetting after this psychological trauma. Utilize whatever resources you have available to you including family, friends, spiritual advisors, or mental health professionals.
 - Make stress reduction a priority- Downtime is essential. Avoid burnout by regularly engaging in activities you find pleasurable and that allow you to recharge. You don’t question your phone battery’s need to recharge each day so why assume you don’t need to recharge as well? Once energy is depleted, action is required before it can be replenished-no one has an endless supply and energy doesn’t magically restore.
- **Work and family conflict, especially if you are quarantined** -This is the hardest issue you will face. How do you balance your career with your family’s concerns and wishes? If you choose one over the other there will be resentment either by you or your family.
 - **Intervention Options**
 - Consensus and Compromise are the best choices. Accommodations that are not reciprocal can and will lead to Resentment.
 - Problem solve ways to meet work demands while at the same time alleviating your family’s fears and anxieties.
 - Generate a timeline for problem solving. Then at the end of the timeline re-evaluate the direction and focus.
 - Take advantage of any Agency’s psychological services
 - Don’t minimize your or your family’s fears.
 - Re-evaluate how you are doing. This involves being honest with yourself and asking others about how they think you are doing



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- **A real time assessment of psychological adjustment for Health Care Professionals and First Responders-**Due to the prolong nature of COVID 19 at this point in time you may be experiencing a variety of symptoms which are causing you both social and psychological disruption in you and your family's life. The most common symptom you may be experiencing is Circuit Overload which will be due to the trauma contamination factor of **TOO MUCH, TOO MANY AND TOO LONG**. Your Surface Energy has probably been drained for a while and you are now trying to function on Core Energy. Surface Energy can be replaced by sleep and resting. Core Energy, however, takes much longer to revive. As was discussed earlier in the handout you may be focusing more on Micro Stimuli which will cause you to be easily irritated. You may also be noticing more family pressures as your duties may be taking you away from your family and responsibilities. You also may have the perception, either implied by your agency, or self-imposed that 'You don't have time to bleed'. Which means that you either don't have the time to decompress or don't feel you should take the time to decompress. Even if you do take the time to relax or decompress it is not helpful because you may either be feeling guilty or adding 'I should be...' statements in your head.
 - **Intervention Options**
 - Accept that you have just entered the realm of the 'New Normal'.
 - You must give yourself permission to relax and decompress without inviting guilt and 'I should' statements.
 - Take small breaks.
 - Separate emotions into categories such as fear of Covid 19, working too many hours, feeling pressure from your family, or feeling bad for not engaging in self-care.
 - Don't be afraid to seek help
 - Remember survival of the fittest does not go to the strongest, fastest or smartest, but to the person who adapts the quickest

During this time, it is important to focus on adaptation and resiliency rather than panic. If you or any member of your family are struggling, take advantage of any available resources either in person or electronically such as tele-counseling being offered by your Department's Psychological Services.



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Additional Resources

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Family Emergency Plan Wallet Cards:

https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1440517182204-fd5e99bd2931f0f566d068ca844370ce/Family_Emergency_plan_wallet_2015.pdf

Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or

Traumatic Event- A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA12-4732/SMA12-4732.pdf>

Managing Intense Emotions During Disaster Response:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//NMH05-0210/NMH05-0210.pdf>

Returning to Work After Disaster Response:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA14-4870/SMA14-4870.pdf>