

Interim Guidance on self-care for homeless services providers updated March 15, 2020

*****Disclaimer: Materials may contain language copied from guidance developed by other communities. Source documents used will be listed at the bottom of this page.***

The outbreak of COVID-19 may be stressful for people. Coping with stress will make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger. Stress during an outbreak may be related to accommodating the needs of people in your care (both at home and work), inability to acquire needed supplies, loss of control, illness and possible death of those you serve.

Each person will react differently to this situation. People who are responding to the COVID-19 outbreak are likely to have a stronger response to the stress.

Stress during an infectious disease outbreak may look like:

- *Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones*
- *Changes in sleep or eating patterns*
- *Difficulty sleeping or concentrating*
- *Worsening of chronic health problems*
- *Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs*

People with preexisting mental health conditions should continue with their treatment and be aware of new or worsening symptoms.

During a Response: Understand and Identify Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress

Limit your time working alone by trying to work in teams.

Responders experience stress during a crisis. When stress builds up it can cause:

- Burnout – feelings of extreme exhaustion and being overwhelmed.
- Secondary traumatic stress – stress reactions and symptoms resulting from exposure to another individual's traumatic experiences, rather than from exposure directly to a traumatic event.

Coping techniques like taking breaks, eating healthy foods, exercising, and using the buddy system can help prevent and reduce burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

Recognize the signs of both of these conditions in yourself and other responders to be sure those who need a break or need help can address these needs.

Signs of burnout

- Sadness, depression, apathy
- Easily frustrated
- Blaming of others, irritability
- Lacking feelings, indifference
- Isolation or disconnection from others
- Poor self-care (hygiene)
- Tired, exhausted or overwhelmed
- Feeling like:
 - A failure
 - Nothing you can do will help
 - You are not doing your job well
 - You need alcohol/other drugs to cope

Signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

- Excessively worry or fear about something bad happening
- Easily startled, or “on guard” all of the time
- Physical signs of stress (e.g. racing heart)
- Nightmares or recurrent thoughts about the traumatic situation
- The feeling that others’ trauma is yours

Get support from team members: Develop a Buddy System

In a buddy system, two responders partner together to support each other, and monitor each other’s stress, workload, and safety.

- Get to know each other. Talk about background, interests, hobbies, and family. Identify each other’s strengths and weaknesses.
- Keep an eye on each other. Try to work in the same location if you can.
- Set up times to check-in with each other. Listen carefully and share experiences and feelings. Acknowledge tough situations and recognize accomplishments, even small ones.
- Offer to help with basic needs such as sharing supplies and transportation.
- Monitor each other’s workloads. Encourage each other to take breaks. Share opportunities for stress relief (rest, routine sleep, exercise, and deep breathing).
- Communicate your buddy’s basic needs and limits to leadership – make your buddy feel “safe” to speak up.

Responder Self-Care Techniques

- Limit working hours to no longer than 12-hour shifts.
- Work in teams and limit amount of time working alone.
- Write in a journal.

- Talk to family, friends, supervisors, and teammates about your feelings and experiences.
- Practice breathing and relaxation techniques.
- Maintain a healthy diet and get adequate sleep and exercise.
- 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 breaks.
- The needs of survivors are not more important than your own needs and well-being.
- 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 this will allow you to keep helping those who are affected.

Responders will experience stress. Managing stress and taking breaks will make you a better responder.

Things you can do reduce secondary traumatic stress (STS) reactions:

- Acknowledge that STS can impact anyone helping families after a traumatic event.
- Learn the symptoms including physical (fatigue, illness) and mental (fear, withdrawal, guilt).
- Allow time for you and your family to recover from responding to the pandemic.
- Create a menu of personal self-care activities that you enjoy, such as spending time with friends and family, exercising, or reading a book.
- Take a break from media coverage of COVID-19.
- Ask for help if you feel overwhelmed or concerned that COVID-19 is affecting your ability to care for your family and patients as you did before the outbreak.
- Talk to your supervisor or coworkers about how you are feeling, find ways to support one another.
- Laugh. This is a heavy time and jokes and laughter can help you get through it.
- Turn on music in the workplace, sing, dance with your co-workers.
- If you have a mental health care provider, reach out to them more frequently, if needed. If you do not have a provider, now may be the time to find one. Connect with your Employee Assistance Program for a referral.
- Find the good in the world.

Things to do following the pandemic

- Rest, allow your body and mind time to recover.

- Debrief with staff, volunteers, people you serve, other providers and community.
- Seek professional help to process the variety of emotions you are experiencing.

CDC: Manage Anxiety & Stress

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

CDC: Emergency Responders: Tips for taking care of yourself

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp>