



TOO MUCH, TOO LONG, & TOO UGLY—Coping with the Psychological Footprint of the NEW ABNORMAL Life of Coexisting with COVID-19

Fire Fighters, Health Care Professionals, Law Enforcement Employees, other First Responders, and Human Services employees along with their families are facing a series of challenges that have developed because of a protracted Pandemic. The knowledge base of the virus seems to be changing on a regular basis going from a perception of being contained to suddenly reaching epidemic levels. Just when it seems like the curve has flattened out new warnings and dangers appear. This rollercoaster ride has created a worldwide perception of fear anxiety and uncertainty. The uncertainty is coupled with many questions such as “should I just shelter in place?” or “Is it okay to start living a normal life again?” The current challenge facing Health Care Professionals and their families involves trying to balance functioning in their careers while trying to stay healthy during the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic. This handout presents information related to both identifying symptoms and reactions related to the Protracted Pandemic as well as providing coping options for dealing with the stress and trauma contamination from having to deal with both **TOO MUCH, TOO LONG AND TOO UGLY IN THE WORLD OF THE NEW ABNORMAL**. The handout is designed for both you and your family members.

FIRST RESPONDERS’ SYMPTOMS AND REACTIONS

- **Psychological Whiplash:** You may experience the whiplash phenomena from receiving information that COVID-19 is being contained to next receiving information that the Pandemic is worse than last April, and hospital beds are all filled. This phenomenon can create feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- **Hypervigilance:** This body reaction usually occurs from stimulus overload related to the Pandemic. The main culprit is the traditional and social media. If you are not engaging in critical thinking you can potentially become overwhelmed with the negativity of the information. The broadcasts usually start out with the number of new positive tests, followed by the number of hospitalizations. The next broadcast will involve the number of people placed on ventilators. To make the stress even more stressful, the broadcasts will always present information stating that the ICUs are completely full and there is difficulty finding places for the deceased. The broadcasts will then provide a sorrowful story about an individual that lost a loved one to COVID-19. The hypervigilance can also become intensified if you or your family members know someone who either got the virus or passed away from it. Hypervigilance coupled with the long working hours can create both mental and physical exhaustion.

- **Anticipatory Anxiety:** The combination of hypervigilance and exhaustion can progress into an anticipatory anxiety which involves the thought process of “waiting for the other shoe to drop.” This feeling of foreboding regarding getting the virus can penetrate both you and your family. You and your family develop a thought process that “one of us will get the virus”. Another symptom that you can develop is your focus changing from **Macro Stimuli to Micro Stimuli**. An example of this reversal can be seen at the breakfast table. You and your family are all eating cornflakes together. However, since you are on ‘tilt’ you will hear the crunching of the cornflakes followed by the sound of everyone gulping the milk and cornflakes. This sound will sound to you like ‘fingernails on a chalkboard’. As a result, you may complicate the problem by losing your temper and yelling at a family member. By that action you will probably experience the ‘Gift that keeps on giving’ which is feeling guilty. Most problems start out as Situation Adjustment Reactions. However, if you don’t mitigate them, they will become a ‘Disorder’. For example, trauma starts out as Post Traumatic Stress, but if you don’t mitigate it in a timely manner it becomes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- **Medical Students Disease:** This disorder will manifest itself when you start to believe that normal flu or other symptoms are the start of the COVID-19 infection. If you review the list of the potential COVID-19 symptoms you will find that it encompasses many symptoms such as include sore throat, lethargy, achiness, fever, etc.
- **Burnout:** Burnout is characterized by thoughts and feelings associated with not being able to take time to rest or decompress because the virus is not letting up and may even be getting worse. In other words, you feel as if there is “no time to bleed.” This is because you are constantly worrying about what is going to happen next either at work or at home. This thought process then leads to your not utilizing your coping skills or self-care techniques. Feeling burnt-out can also result in sleep disturbances, irritability, or numerous other physical problems.
- **Long Term Considerations:** The situational adjustment anxiety, if not mitigated, can turn into a long-term psychological disorder. This disorder can add other emotional reactions such as depression, long term hopelessness, post-traumatic stress, or numerous other symptoms.

FAMILY MEMBERS SYMPTOMS AND REACTIONS

- **Development of the Above-Mentioned Symptoms:** The above symptoms can develop in your family members on their own or they may develop the symptoms from your reactions. Family contagion is quite common in children. Children can develop a strong COVID-19 fear or phobia from their parents.

- **Shattering of Comfort and Safety Zones:** The biggest symptom experienced by family members center around a shattering of their comfort and safety zones. Home may no longer be perceived as a safe and relaxing place because of the fear that the working family member may become contagious and bring home the virus. Overtime, and because of being quarantined, it is natural to have your comfort zone shrinking and activities that used to be enjoyable are now quite scary. A good example is a fear of going out to eat at a restaurant or traveling in an airplane.
- **Fear:** For many families, watching the news may be terrifying experience. The topics can vary from the status of the Pandemic, to observing nationwide riots, hearing about the country being split as well as many other potential stressors or traumas.
- **Feeling Divided:** Adult family members may also find themselves being at odds with each other in terms of dealing with the virus, complying with wearing masks and social distancing as well as complying with quarantine requirements.
- **Consideration for Children:** Children can easily become contaminated with fear, panic, and stress because of observing their parents, watching too much TV or consuming excessive social media. The children may also develop these feelings of fear and anxiety from their friends. Parents tend to think that they can keep their fears and concerns to themselves and not let the children know what is happening. However, children have good hearing and vision and as a result pick up a lot more information than their parents think.

WHAT TO DO

It is important to realize that relief and a return to normalcy cannot be achieved immediately or by utilizing only one or a few techniques. In addition to your own effective coping techniques please consider some of the following techniques:

- Do not worry alone, talk about your feelings with each other.
- Utilize resources such as your friends, other family members, your church, peer support, and psychological services.
- Develop specific “Rules of Engagement” on what to do when fear or other emotions get too extreme. However, at the same time, give yourself and your family permission to relax and have fun.
- Make sure to utilize effective coping techniques that have worked for you in the past.

- With children, talk with them about their fears and come up with an age-appropriate solution.
- When everything seems to feel out of control, spend time on things you do have control over.
- If your fear is intensifying, develop a “What if” thought process where you take the fearful thought and develop a solution for mitigation.
- Practice tactical breathing and give yourself permission to engage in Self-Care
- When all else fails, consider seeking professional help.

EVALUATING SYMPTOM SEVERITY AND IMPROVEMENT--When evaluating your individual trauma response, it is important to keep several factors in mind in terms of symptom presentation:

- **Frequency**-how often do the symptoms occur
- **Duration**-how long do the symptoms last
- **Intensity**-how vivid or strong are the symptoms
- **Interference**-to what degree do the symptoms create problems in your functioning or become apparent to others (family, co-workers, etc.)
- **Deviations from baseline**-Objectively evaluate what you were like before the investigation and what you are like now. If you or someone you trust notes that you are “acting different” or “not like yourself” this should alert your attention.

