



COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:
EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICE (EMS) PROVIDERS

Version 2, 5/20/20

The COVID-19 outbreak has placed EMS providers (e.g., emergency medical technicians, paramedics, dispatchers, operators, mechanics, administrative staff, logistics and operations staff) on the front lines of caring in distressing, sometimes traumatic, fear-inducing, unpredictable, and heartbreaking situations. If you are an EMS provider, you do not have the luxury of physically-distancing, so you are at more risk of being infected with the virus or spreading the virus to others. You may not have enough access to equipment and supplies, may have to work long hours with little time for breaks or self-care, and may experience a false sense of security and so may not use masks and other PPE consistently. It's understandable to not want to acknowledge some of the risky situations you face because doing so may just add to your stress about being at work caring for patients instead of at home with your own family, not getting feedback about your patients' outcomes, or dealing with ethical dilemmas and moral injury (i.e., distress when you must make choices that violate your personal values).

If you experience some of these stressors, you may feel anxious, sad, angry, overwhelmed, or burned out. These feelings may make it hard for you to function your best at work or home. Many people who are stressed are not comfortable reaching out for support and try to deal with difficult feelings on their own. Talking with colleagues or a mental health specialist does not mean you have a mental health problem or are not "strong" enough to cope. Talking to someone who is trained can simply help you feel better faster. Although no wellness guide can fully address what EMS workers are dealing with during COVID-19, some of the tips below may help you cope better. Helpful resources also are included.

Take Care of Yourself as Much as You Can at Work

- Prioritize your basic needs (although this may seem trivial, it's very important)
 - Take breaks to eat, even snacks
- Breathe mindfully using square breathing
 - Sit upright or stand with your shoulders pulled back (imagine an orange between your shoulder blades and you're trying to squeeze it)
 - Focus on the sensation of your chest expanding as air moves in through your nose, the sensation of your breath held in your chest and then the sensation of your chest falling as you exhale your breath
 - Do this while using the following pattern:
 - Inhale over 4 seconds
 - Hold your breath for 4 seconds



- Exhale over 4 seconds
 - Pause 4 seconds and then begin the cycle again
 - Repeat this cycle, especially after stressful situations, until you feel calm
- Pace yourself as much as possible
 - Check in with yourself about how you are doing/feeling at the beginning, middle and end of each shift
 - Ask for help when you need it (again, this may seem trivial but it's important)
 - Prepare yourself for combat, not a sprint or even a marathon
- Make suggestions about or offer solutions to solvable workplace problems that are affecting your daily morale and stress level

Take Care of Yourself Outside of Work

- Prioritize your basic needs outside of work
- Make adequate sleep between shifts a priority (See our Wellness Guide on Sleep)
- Make time to move or exercise
 - Consider short workouts
 - Plan work-out times
 - Turn workouts into social activities
- Participate in yoga or mindfulness programs (see resource list below and list of apps)
- Limit or avoid substance use
- Take a break from COVID-19
 - Limit media and social media related to COVID-19
 - Limit your time talking and thinking about COVID-19
- Take action to change the things you can
 - Decide what is in your power and what is not
 - Focus on present tasks and challenges rather than on the past or future “what if” scenarios
 - Ensure good self-care
 - Schedule your non-work time to meet your needs
 - Schedule time to do activities you enjoy
 - Spend time with people you care about and get creative with how you do this while remaining physically distant
 - Acknowledge and accept things not within your control
 - Say “yes” to life just as it is
- Accept your emotions and thoughts
 - Recognize that your feelings are understandable, helpful, and do not mean you have a problem or mental illness
 - Talk with people who understand and validate how you feel



- Accept your uncomfortable thoughts (rather than push them away or change them) and let them wash through you like a wave as you turn your attention to the present
- Clarify contradictory feelings - “I’m both a dedicated EMS worker expected to care for patients no matter what, *and* I am an involved family member who wants to care for loved ones at home”
- Be compassionate to yourself
 - Be guided by the motto, “good enough;” no one is perfect
 - Remind yourself you are doing the best you can in any given moment
 - Remember when feel overwhelmed that you are making a positive difference and honor your service
- Seek individual therapy and/or medication if you feel too distressed or overwhelmed to function
 - Check out local behavioral health resources targeted toward COVID-19 healthcare workers

Promote Teamwork

- Look out for each other
- Develop and use your buddy system
- Check-in regularly (informally and formally) with team members
 - Check in with your partner at the beginning and end of the shift to see how they are feeling and coping
 - Talk informally with colleagues about things happening at work
 - Chat with colleagues about what they are doing to relax outside of work
- Use good communication skills
 - Respect differences and respond to those with different views or feelings than you with tolerance, patience, and compassion
 - Listen to others
 - Talk clearly and calmly with colleagues
 - Address problems or conflicts when they come up and try to resolve them
- Foster team unity
 - Collaborate with other team members
 - Help colleagues problem-solve
 - Step forward to help when you can and allow others to step forward when
 - they can
 - Use humor when appropriate
 - Take time together to listen to a mindfulness app, share what you are each grateful about, and/or join in a prayer circle or a physical challenge
 - Pause, debrief, and support one another after tough cases/situations
- Recognize and celebrate each other’s contributions



- End shifts with thanking your partner for something they did, small or big, that was helpful
- Recognize, formally, people who go above and beyond the call of duty and those who are unsung heroes
- Request support and debriefings from a trained behavioral health specialist

Connect with Others

- Distance physically, not emotionally, and prioritize connecting and interacting with others - connecting with others makes people resilient
 - Schedule regular phone or Zoom times with friends and family each day
 - Utilize Zoom support meetings and online forums
 - Check-in with colleagues who may be self-isolating or quarantining
- Connect with family members and friends to get a break from your work stress
 - Discuss topics other than work so that you don't only focus on things that are sad or hard
- Reach out to people (trusted co-workers, partner, friends, family members, spiritual advisor) for understanding and support
 - Vent or talk about your feelings, concerns, and experiences
 - Talk about the stress you are under
 - Figure out why you are thinking and feeling the way you are
 - Decide on your next steps, if any
- Talk with your partner and/or other family members about the ways they can be of assistance
 - Brainstorm how to communicate best
 - Plan strategies for managing competing demands
 - Determine helpful home changes or routines
 - Reassure them you are doing what you can to take care of yourself
- Be aware of your split loyalties (e.g., family versus work, self-care versus caring for others)
 - Try to find some comfortable path forward with the support of others
 - Recognize that a perfect solution is impossible

Manage Distressing Work Situations

- Stay up to date with information about how to handle high-risk situations
 - Review department or unit protocols regularly and reach out to your managers for COVID-related changes to policies
 - Ask a mentor or colleague for feedback about care you provided and PPE use
- Prioritize your own safety!



- Take any extra time and effort needed to do this
- Prepare for the likelihood of limited, slower, or no help from bystanders or other services when in the community
 - Talk with colleagues about the heightened anxiety and agitation in the community and how to support one another
 - Share ideas of what has worked to manage this and what hasn't worked
 - Brainstorm about resources you can use given the lower level of support in the field
 - Remember your safety is a priority
 - Avoid taking on additional risks since there is less help available
- Acknowledge that patients may be sicker than usual, from COVID or from neglecting other illnesses
 - Ensure your safety at all times
 - Use appropriate PPE – contact managers or other colleagues for guidance if PPE is not available or not sufficient before engaging with the patient
 - Do your best in these circumstances - that is all that's expected of you
 - Hold debriefings after challenging situations
 - Discuss the case with colleagues as soon as possible after the situation to prevent or reduce the chances of you having distressing images, memories, or thoughts about the case – your brain will gradually “get used to” the images, memories, and thoughts and they will become less disturbing or intrusive
 - Request updates from Emergency Medicine colleagues to get closure on difficult cases
 - Ask for a contact person who can give you updates on your patients to gain closure and confidence when patients do well or better than expected
 - Practice radical acceptance (see below) if a patient update is not possible or unavailable, like at some private facilities
- Manage your anxiety and feelings of helplessness and uncertainty
 - Stop, breathe, think, and then act in high-risk situations
 - Remember you are not alone, and your reactions are understandable and normal
 - Block upsetting emotions until the immediate situation is over
 - Visualize yourself packaging up and throwing away your negative feelings
 - Keep moving forward mentally
- Support colleagues who are distressed about high risk situations
 - Be present and listen
 - Provide a genuine human and emotional response
 - Empathize as much as you can
 - Be positive and accepting of your colleague



- Share your own fears and emotions
- Be guided by an ethical framework when making challenging clinical decisions
 - Notice situations that raise moral distress/injury
 - Discuss and address challenging ethical dilemmas and situations that lead to moral distress/injury with colleagues and consultants – their insight and support may be informative, helpful, grounding, and calming
 - Solve ethical dilemmas with a team approach (colleagues, managers, ethics advisors, medical colleagues) to avoid feeling overwhelmed and to reach the best possible outcome

Acknowledge Grief Responses and Existential Challenges

- Identify and grieve the multiple, significant losses associated with the pandemic
 - Recognize losses in usual routines and ways of coping, feelings of safety, the practice of healthcare, and in people's health and lives
 - Realize that many losses are ambiguous and without closure
 - Validate the losses that are ongoing and not tangible
- Acknowledge key existential struggles related to identity, freedom, isolation, meaning, mortality, and death
 - Reflect upon these struggles yourself
 - Discuss these topics with people you trust and with whom you are close
- Make meaning professionally and personally
 - Consider the positive aspects of your life that remain the same and are unchanging
 - Reflect on your own personal values and how these may be strengthened or clarified during this distressing time
 - Maintain hope, even in the face of considerable challenge, related to what is positive in your life, your relationships, and your work
 - Identify aspects of your life that have changed due to COVID-19 and that you would like to carry forward after the pandemic response subsides
- Take time as a team to memorialize colleagues who have passed away
 - Process deaths of colleagues together
 - Share memories, photos, and readings/poems that remind you of the person
 - Plan for a more permanent memorial at your workplace or celebration of life when appropriate

Helpful Resources

- <https://healthblog.uofmhealth.org/wellness-prevention/3-easy-exercises-for-anxiety-relief-you-can-use-anywhere>



- “Worry Breath”, a square breathing app on iTunes, may be downloaded and used for free.
 - Cognitively-Based Compassion Training Resources: <https://www.compassion.emory.edu/center-covid19-response.html>
 - The National Center for PTSD: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/covid/COVID_healthcare_workers.asp
 - Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress: https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Sustaining_WellBeing_Healthcare_Personnel_during_Infectious_Disease_Outbreaks.pdf
 - COVID Trauma Response Working Group: https://232fe0d6-f8f4-43eb-bc5d-6aa50ee47dc5.filesusr.com/ugd/6b474f_5626bd1321da4138b1b43b78b8de2b20.pdf
 - British Columbia Disaster Worker Care Committee: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2
 - World Health Organization: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2
- World Health Organization:
https://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/
- Intensive Care Society: <https://www.practitionerhealth.nhs.uk/media/content/files/Sustaining%20wellbeing%20COVID19.pdf>
 - The Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>
 - Curtis JR, Cross EK, & Stapleton RD (2020) The importance of addressing advance care planning and decisions about do-not-resuscitate orders during novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). *JAMA*: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2763952>
 - Emanuel EJ, Pershad G, Upshar R et al (2020) Fair allocation of scarce medical resources in the time of COVID-19. *NEJM*: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/10.1056/NEJMsb2005114>