

Dealing with Stress as a COVID Pandemic Essential Worker

As an “Essential Worker” during this Pandemic you have been participating in a seemingly never-ending critical incident/event and you may now be experiencing (or may experience later) some strong emotional or physical reactions. Many of us fail to see these reactions in ourselves, or we “tough it out” and keep on going because “we’re needed.”

If this were a sudden, traumatic event it’s likely we’d notice its impact on us. But, with the long grind of the pandemic, it whittles away at us, often in much smaller increments. Sometimes emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after a traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later, And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

Within the on-going daily events of the pandemic, it’s easy for many of us to overlook the impact upon us, or to try to push through that impact. Additionally, life continues and may add other unrelated stresses which create a cumulative effect.

With a long-term event such as the pandemic, the signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may sneak up on us and we don’t realize how much they are affecting us. It is often helpful to find a “buddy” to talk with, to ask what they observe about how we’re dealing with the stress and to help us conduct a “self-inventory” to determine how well we’re meeting the challenges and coping with the stress.

Another useful technique is to “journal.” Simply set aside some time and write down your reactions and experiences each day, or several times in the day if necessary. Forget worrying about any spelling, grammar, punctuation. This isn’t a school project that you’ll be handing in. This is a place for you to set down your thoughts and emotions for yourself and no one else.

When you’re doing a self-inventory, what should you be considering? Let’s look at the common signs and signals of stress reactions. For each signal, write down a number from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating you’re experiencing it all the time and zero being you haven’t been experiencing it.

Stress can impact you physically.

You may be experiencing:

- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Sleep disturbances
- Over/under activity
- Nightmares, repetitive dreams
- Change in appetite
- Digestive problems
- Physical problems
- Headaches
- Nausea

Stress can affect your Cognitive (thinking/reasoning) abilities.

You may be experiencing

- Lack of concentration
- Flashbacks
- Difficulty with decisions
- Memory disturbance
- Amnesia
- Confusion
- Poor problem solving
- Disturbed thinking
- Poor abstract thinking
- Change in alertness

Stress can affect your Emotions.

You may be experiencing:

- Fear
- Guilt
- Emotional numbing
- Oversensitivity
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Feeling helpless
- Anger
- Irritability
- Frustration

And, Stress can affect your Behavior.

You may be experiencing:

- Change in activity
- Change in communication
- Withdrawal
- Suspiciousness
- Hyper-alertness
- Startle reflex
- Change in sexual behavior
- Emotional outbursts
- Scapegoating
- Pacing

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Some tips on building your Personal Resilience:

- Know your personal signs of stress and monitor yourself. Know when you need to take action to reduce stress!
- Be careful of your own expectations of yourself...remember that you are human.
- Pace yourself...take breaks to be able to function at your best.
- Focus on the people you are helping rather than what is not being done. Remind yourself and your team you are making a significant contribution to the community.
- Use humor to reduce the stress when it is appropriate to do so.
- Get physical exercise as you can. It helps your mood and can promote sleep.
- Practice mindfulness (pay attention to the habitual negative thinking we engage in which leads to depressive and anxious spirals) and instead be focused in the present.
- Practice stress reduction techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, etc. ...every day!
- Eat and drink nutritiously and avoid excessive junk food, caffeine, alcohol, or tobacco.
- Get adequate sleep and rest.
- Limit exposure to media coverage when off work...try to have a mental break when not working.
- Maintain contact with your family/friends on a regular basis.
- Use time off duty to recharge and connect with people who support you. Do things that you enjoy when you can to have more balance.
- Have a buddy system with a peer as a source of support...talk it out at the end of each shift.
- Write it out...keep a journal to express your reactions and experiences at the end of each shift.
- Be aware and avoid unhealthy coping strategies such as excessive alcohol or other substance use, complete withdrawal, or excessive risk-taking.
- Use peer support teams...they are there for you!
- Use professional support as needed. It is a strength to get help when you need it!
- Schedule yourself for some "You" time. Use it to do things YOU like to do that you haven't had time to enjoy.
- You're normal and having normal reactions - don't label yourself as crazy.
- Talk to people - talk is the most healing medicine.
- Help those around you as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Make a list of the things you used to do that give you joy, but you no longer do. Then, do those things again.
- Realize those around you are also under stress.
- Accept offered help.
- Eat nutritious, well balanced meals high in carbohydrates and low in sugar.
- Avoid excessive use of caffeine.
- Don't make any big life changes