

Public Safety Resilience During a Pandemic

Bay Area CISM Team, San Mateo County CISM Team

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Public safety personnel respond to stress like all human beings. More than most people, we tend to be reluctant to reveal our negative thoughts and feelings, hoping to protect ourselves and our families from what we accept as the ugly parts of our job. The younger ones among us often are more open and honest about sharing thoughts and feelings; the rest of us are coming to accept that talking helps.

For public safety, pandemic operations are a super-charged version of a day with an exceptional number of medical incidents. We rely on our training, processes, procedures, and each other to maintain as much of the old normal as we can, while making changes (much faster than we usually do, which is also stressful) to cope with the new normal. We face issues that complicate our responses: a public that ignores emergency mandates, shortages of Personnel Protective Equipment (PPEs), rising on-duty hours, and the chance that we, family or co-workers will become sick or die from Covid-19 or the secondary disruptions. These are unpleasant thoughts. We will almost certainly be impacted by grief displayed by those we serve. Recovery may be difficult for everyone.

Fear, worry, anxiety, irritability, and blame are natural responses to a world and job that so suddenly became abnormal. How we treat ourselves and each other is critical to both our personal and group success. Many of us sometimes have a sense of unreality, feeling like we are in a bad movie, asking, “*Can this really be happening?*”

We usually accept what is coming at us knowing it will only last a period of minutes or hours. Never have we been asked to deal with an event like what we are entering now. We will all need to take actions to remain “balanced” over the next few months.

Things we can do to maintain balance:

Choose how we receive and share information – Utilize various sources for public and professional information. Often the news media and social media sensationalize information using entertainment principles rather than the ethical reporting of facts. Just because it’s on the internet does not make it true. Try distancing yourself from the media or put yourself on a diet of time spent with information input. Remember that constantly exposing ourselves to this input can have a detrimental impact on how we respond to each other, ourselves and the public. *Decide which sources you are going to trust.*

Realize that new habits may be required

Accepting new habits is hard. We have a strong inclination to cling to tradition, reluctant to move away from proven, effective processes, but many of those are no longer appropriate. As we adapt to our new (and hopefully temporary) normal aspects of our lives, things will continue to

change. How we conduct our work, shopping, family activities, socializing is likely to be challenging. Separation from loved ones and friends can leave you feeling isolated when you need contact the most. Constantly having children at home stresses relationships. New habits may be needed. Instead of telling yourself (or others) You “*should*” do something, convert the idea into a positive: “I am choosing to do X so that I feel more energy, stay healthy, help my peers, care for my loved ones.” Accept that others may have solutions to problems that are better than your own. Accept that a team moves more successfully than a group of individuals. Be gentle with yourself and recognize that all change is stressful, but not necessarily bad.

Self-Care is Important

Exercise to relieve stress through physical exertion. Many of us realize that stress causes the brain to tell the body to release *stress hormones* – epinephrine, dopamine, cortisol and others trigger the “fight-or-flight” reaction, which helps us react to crises and opportunities. In public safety, we often become unaware that this chemical manufacturing process has become constant because our job makes it our normal condition (which is like always driving your car in low gear!). Often our decision-making processes, relationship concerns and how we view the world can be directly tied to the abundance of stress hormones and chemicals in our bodies. We also have *recovery hormones*, including oxytocin and androgens, which trigger repair and growth of the damage done by stress hormones. When our stress and recovery hormones are in balance, we can perform at our best – physically and mentally.

Exercise with appropriate rest and nutrition are excellent for getting your stress and recovery hormones in balance. Sleep lowers your cortisol level and gives your brain time to process difficult memories, so that they don’t linger. Positive social interactions – relaxing and talking with people you can be yourself around – raise your oxytocin levels. Giving care to others also triggers your recovery reactions. Don’t live your life like a marathon; your “down time” is also productive because that’s when your mind and body rebuild and grow. A healthy, active life is a series of sprints.

Diet is important. Ensure that you get enough healthy calories spread out throughout the day. That’s not to say you can’t have your favorite distraction (just like it’s okay to skip exercise sometimes). Try and make sure you get the foods you need and not just the ones you crave (remember that cortisol makes you crave carbs!). Proteins, vegetables, and fruits are best, but an energy bar once in a while is fine to keep you going.

Awareness and Acceptance of Past Trauma

Most of us have seen the worst of what the world has to offer. It is okay to acknowledge that some of our incidents stick with us and change us. Sometimes we wonder “what if” or “had this happened” if things would have been different. Occasionally we see something that reminds us of past incidents. Look upon those incidents as stones in an imaginary pack on your back. We all carry one of these backpacks! Sudden, big changes and uncertainty can remind you of the weight of those past experiences and feelings. It’s normal but can be troublesome or even debilitating. People may be irritable or angry, express unintended emotions, or have other reactions. Please be patient with yourself and others. Take breaks, appreciate a few deep breaths, stretch. Unpack

stress by talking about how your reactions with a trusted confidant. Be the safe person for others to say what's on their minds.

Lastly, if your agency, city or county provides access to a Critical Incident Stress Management Team trained in assisting public safety personnel don't be reluctant to tap into their services. They exist to help you bounce back from difficult incidents, to maintain a workplace that remains operationally effective by addressing concerns not covered in the policies manual. Chaplains who know your agency can also be a helpful resource.

These may be long and difficult times. Many of you have experienced other occasions in our careers where our emotions may have been heightened. We have weathered the HIV/Aids crisis, terrorism and 9-11 attacks, as well as the recent Fentanyl concerns. We can rely on each other to get through this too.

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