

Mental health support for first responders during the COVID-19 pandemic

Firefighters, emergency medical personnel, police officers and other first responders continue to face challenging, dangerous and debilitating situations as they protect our local and national security. Helping people with death, grief, pain and loss combined with infection, long working hours, poor sleep, physical exertion and lack of time to recover between traumatic events can lead to a wide range of mental health problems for first responders.

First responders are always on the front line facing highly stressful and risky calls. Due to the rapid pace of their work, it can be difficult to process and manage what has happened, which can lead to depression, stress and post-traumatic stress symptoms, suicidal idealization, and other behavioral health conditions. Here are some practical tips to help first responders understand how to recognize and manage burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

What are burnout and secondary traumatic stress?

Burnout refers to feelings of extreme exhaustion and overexertion from what one does and experiences, typically over a long period of time. Secondary traumatic stress consists of reactions and symptoms resulting from contact with another person’s traumatic experience, not direct contact with a traumatic event.

Signs of burnout and secondary traumatic stress

Burnout	Secondary traumatic stress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling tired, exhausted or overwhelmed • Feeling sadness, depression or apathy • Getting easily frustrated • Blaming others for small things, irritability • Lacking feelings, indifference • Diminishing self-care (hygiene) • Isolation or separation from others • Feeling like a failure, nothing you can do helps, you don’t do your job well or you need alcohol/other drugs to deal with it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessively worrying or being scared about something bad happening • Becoming easily startled or “on guard” all the time • Showing physical signs of stress such as a racing heart) • Having nightmares or recurrent thoughts about the traumatic situation • Feeling that the trauma of others belongs to you

Coping techniques

- Remember that it is not selfish to take breaks; the needs of survivors are no more important than your own needs and constant work can prevent you from making your best contribution.
- Limitation of working time to 12-hour shifts.
- Take care of yourself by eating a healthy diet, exercising and avoiding excessive consumption of substances.
- Use the buddy system to support each other. Monitor each other's stress, workload and safety.
- Talk to family, friends, supervisors and teammates about your feelings and experiences.
- Practice breathing and relaxation techniques.

If you want to talk to someone and are uncomfortable sharing your feelings with people you know, call or text the Magellan Healthcare crisis hotline. We have set it up for first responders and medical staff to help you manage your mental health and emotional well-being. Our licensed mental health clinicians are trained and ready to listen and help with mental health services and access to other resources, such as community support. Help is free and confidential.

To contact us:

- **By phone:** Call 1-800-327-7451 (TTY 711) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- **By text:** Text SUPPORT to 78137 from anywhere in the United States, from 8:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday. Texts received outside of those hours will be directed to the telephone hotline.

Thank you for helping our cities, towns and country - your selflessness and heroism are inspiring.

For more information and tips, visit www.MagellanHealthcare.com/COVID-19.

Sources:

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