



## From Surviving to Thriving through COVID-19 by Dr. Monica Vermani, C. Psych

*We're all impacted by the Coronavirus epidemic. For many, life has slowed to a near standstill. For first responders on the front lines of taking care of the needs of the community they serve, trying times can be more demanding and stressful than ever. And for first responders' family members and supports, who carry the family load and care deeply for a loved one on the front lines, these times can be fraught with anxiety, fear and worry.*

During these unprecedented times, everyone is stressed, fatigued, and confused, some more than ever before. Many people are feeling a loss of control. They're isolated, angry, worried, wracked with self-doubt, feeling overwhelmed by dark thoughts, moods, and anxieties.

For you, as a first responder, and for your family and supports, these stressors are exponentially greater. At times like these, many first responders wonder how they will survive until life returns to normal.

### BEYOND SURVIVAL

As members of a unique population on the front lines, you are well aware of the heightened pressures and risks in times of crisis. Responding to the needs of a community in crisis is at once demanding and rewarding. During difficult times, first responders witness human suffering, risk personal harm, cope with increasing workloads and extended separation from family and supports. It's in times such as these that managing stress and implementing self-care becomes essential.

Right here, and right now, we have a chance to learn how to pay attention to ourselves, mind, body, and soul. With the right strategies, we can more than survive, we can shift to be healthier and better versions of ourselves.



Why settle for survival when we can shift and thrive? To that end, I have compiled a list of strategies to help you make the COVID-19 crisis an opportunity to bring powerful new skills and approaches to your self-care and wellbeing.

### YOUR SELF, YOUR TIME AND YOUR ENVIRONMENT

I tell my patients: "Don't give from your well, give from your overflow." We simply need to take care of ourselves before taking care of others. Start with you. Ask yourself: What do I need today? What do I need to prioritize today to help manage my stress, and make me a healthier and happier version of myself? What self-care can I bring into my day?

Most first responders put their own needs last. You feel a need to appear strong, and capable of facing whatever the day brings, even when conditions are overwhelming. You may feel immense pressure to perform for the sake of your job, and place high expectations on yourself to succeed.

*"Don't give from your well, give from your overflow."*

### YOUR BASIC NEEDS

With your needs in mind, create supportive routines, like:

- taking care of your hygiene and your appearance every day
- eating healthy meals regularly, on schedule
- limiting stimulants, like caffeine and sugar, and depressants, like alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes
- following social distancing and community guidelines
- making time to communicate with your family, friends and supports. You can communicate face to face with people around the world using an ever-increasing array of web-based platforms, like Zoom, FaceTime, and Skype, to name a few
- surrounding yourself with love, compassion, support and connection. Make sure you get quality time to wind down, connect and enjoy the company of people around you
- spend time on your interests and intellectual pursuits
- practice healthy sleep behaviors. Train your body to downshift by getting into a routine sleep pattern.

## YOUR FAMILY

While you're busier than ever, your family may be struggling to cope with sudden changes in their routines: needs in mind, create supportive routines, like:

- laying out a clear schedule for your household, including time together and apart
- sharing your schedule among members of your family
- helping family members bring in some playfulness – organizing pictures, music, paperwork, taking up a new hobby, explore new interests, reading, painting, playing a board game, learning a new skill

## YOU, YOUR STRESS AND BURNOUT

We all experience and process stress in our own unique way. But for first responders, chronic stress is common. If chronic stress is not well managed, it can lead to burnout, feelings of extreme exhaustion and overwhelm. Burnout is characterized by:

- persistent emotional exhaustion
- depleted energy and loss of on-the-job efficiency
- loss of enthusiasm and motivation
- a diminished sense of personal accomplishment
- cynicism and a pessimistic outlook

## RULES OF RESPONDER SELF-CARE & STRESS MANAGEMENT

Burnout not only affects the individual, it also negatively impacts the entire team. Knowing and ringing in special self-care rules for responders, wherever possible, will help mitigate on-the-job stress and burnout, for you and your whole team. Besides obvious methods of self-care, like regular physical activity and a healthy diet – two great ways of decreasing your risk of burnout, try to:

- limit working hours to no longer than 12-hour shifts
- limit or avoid the use of caffeine and alcohol
- work in teams and limit amount of time working alone
- even if it seems 'selfish,' maintain a healthy diet and get adequate sleep and exercise
- talk to family, friends, supervisors, and teammates about your feelings and experiences
- practice breathing and relaxation techniques
- accept that it is okay to draw boundaries when you need to, and say "no" when you're exhausted
- take regular breaks, and remind yourself that it is not selfish to do so

## INTEGRATING POSITIVE HABITS

It's important to integrate positive habits into your lifestyle to help you mitigate the effects of stressful experiences. Otherwise, your mind can create a dam that interrupts the natural flow and range of your emotions. When enough pressure builds, this dam can break and release raw, intense emotional reactions. These outbursts not only negatively impact your own health, but can hurt those around you.

One way to make healthy habits a part of your lifestyle is to take advantage of the time off shift work gives you. These breaks give you time to recover physically and emotionally from work-related duties. But these breaks only work if you're open and intentional about engaging in activities that help you process your experiences and heal. While spending time on personal interests isn't a replacement for accessing professional mental health services, participating in regular, self-care practices can lead to many of the same positive outcomes.

## YOUR FEELINGS

During this unprecedented time, it's important to stay connected to our thoughts and feelings. Pay attention to your anger. Anger is a blanket emotion, under which more specific emotions like, fear, concern, a sense of abandonment, overwhelm or hopelessness can be lurking. Learn to examine the causes and identify the true emotions under your 'blanket' of anger. Sitting with and examining uncomfortable and potentially explosive emotions rather than acting out leads to more positive interactions. It also cultivates more open and compassionate communication – not only with others – but even more importantly, with yourself.

## YOUR NEGATIVE THOUGHTS, HABITS AND PATTERNS

What you focus on, expands. It is easy to become stuck in anxious loops and worst-case scenarios. Make the effort to reframe hopeless, negative thoughts to positive, grateful, hopeful thoughts. Yes, there are challenges out there, but there is also beauty and goodness.

Whatever your go-to negative habits and routines... like comfort eating, procrastination, denial, using substances, overuse of distractions like video games, porn, gambling, online shopping, to name a few, bring forth safety plans and practices to overcome challenges that keep you stuck in unhealthy patterns.

## PROACTIVELY MANAGE STRESS

Immersing yourself in healthy activities helps you foster a state of mindfulness, which means your full attention is focused on what you're experiencing in the present moment. Mindfulness reduces the dissociative behaviours between the analytical and the emotional mind. Mindfulness activities help to relieve emotional tension spontaneously and naturally. We simply feel better after a mindfulness activity such as spending time in nature, finishing a personal project, or helping others.

Engage mind/body practices, apps like "insight timer", "headspace", or "calm" and working on workbooks to manage feelings of being anxious and overwhelmed like "mind over mood."

Enforce and promote a calm state of mind – breathing exercises, meditate, listen to mindfulness podcasts, videos, positive affirmations, journal, mantras. And complete a daily gratitude log. At the end of every day make note of:

- what you are grateful for
- the things that brought you joy
- what you love about yourself

Find ways to continually engage in healthy activities during the most trying times in your career and life. This process will likely involve accepting a level of vulnerability that may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But the emotional stresses you face — and the effect those stresses have on you physically and mentally — underlines just how important it is to invest in your emotional health.

## TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Remember, we need to learn to give from our overflow, not from our well. Be selfish, protective and proactive about your physical and mental health. Seek attention if you're experiencing symptoms. Use telehealth to talk to a healthcare professional. There are also many mental health care resources, tools at your disposal in the form of distress lines and support centres. If anxiety is unmanageable, there are many HIPAA compliant video chat platforms to facilitate counseling services with professionals specializing in stress, anxiety, mood, and suicide crisis management. If you're in need, take initiatives to seek therapy. If you find symptoms bubbling up of mood, anxiety, and stress, call a crisis line, distress centre, look up stress management resources and supports. Call friends and family. Create healthy support groups and buddy systems. Manage health, sleep hygiene and bring in a lightbox to manage seasonal depression/low mood symptoms.

## STRIVE FOR YOUR HIGHEST AND BEST

This is a moment in time and this moment will pass. Let's breathe in the beauty and perfection of right now, and seize this opportunity to shift and change. You are at once perfect and a work in progress, just like everyone else, and the world itself. Amongst the chaos and uncertainty, please remember to breathe, be grateful, self-care and see the beauty amongst the chaos.

The future is imagination, you can imagine whatever you hope to manifest for yourself. There is no limit as to how beautiful your life can become. As we pass through this time, rather than imagining worst-case scenarios, envision what you want to bring forth in your life. Imagine you at your highest and best.

In psychology, we say for any habit to change we must reinforce the healthy habit for at least 21 days. At this point in time, the world is re-setting patterns and health standards for many. At the same time, you can start to integrate healthy habits and learn to grow, and leave behind the unhealthy patterns that no longer serve us. Imagine this as your time to do more than survive. The past is just a memory, and the future is just a thought. There's no time like the present to reflect, reset and thrive!