

Fostering Resilience

First responders are chronically exposed to traumatic situations. Feelings of frustration, helplessness, and anger can be exacerbated by tragic events that are occurring locally, nationally, and internationally. As public servants, it is inherent to focus on others and it is also professional survival to suffer in silence while continuing to perform the job. First responders may forget that it is also human to have reactions to stressful events. Understanding stress reactions will not only help you monitor your own reactions, but also help identify any peers who might be experiencing distress.

Some of us may experience the release of powerful stress hormones after such an event that contribute to physical, emotional and behavioral reactions, all of which are normal and, in time, will gradually fade away. For many of us, the stress reactions will not necessarily be intense, but there may be some challenges in our journey to bounce back. Here are a few tips to help you accelerate your ability to bounce back and function well again.

Normal Reactions to Stressful Events

Physical Responses

- Change in sleep pattern
- Change in appetite
- Shallow, rapid breathing
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Increased heart rate
- Stomach upset

Emotional Responses

- Shock or numbness
- Anger
- Fear
- Guilt
- Frustration
- Sadness
- Feeling unsafe or vulnerable
- Loneliness

Psychological Responses

- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty remembering details of event
- Reactions to sights, sounds or odors associated with the event

Behavioral Responses

- Withdrawal from others
- Angry outburst
- Crying
- Irritability
- Decreased energy/ambition
- Marital/relationship conflict
- Increased use of alcohol or substances

Tips to Foster Resilience

- Believe in your abilities to bounce back.
- Care for yourself by eating well, exercising, and resting when needed.
- If you are on medication, continue on your prescriptions and consider scheduling an appointment with your doctor.
- Seek out comfortable, familiar surroundings that promote a sense of security.
- Share your thoughts and experiences with people who are supportive and optimistic – it also helps to talk or write about it to keep your mood clear.
- Work on beginning to accept what has happened.
- Give yourself time to rebound. It is not a good time to make a life-changing decision.
- Set a forward-thinking positive goal for yourself.
- Return to or create daily routines for yourself and family.
- If you have a faith community, seek guidance.
- Engage your spiritual practices.
- Find your sense of humor. It is helpful to laugh, especially during challenging times.
- Identify or recommit to your purpose in life.
- If you feel “stuck”, consider consulting with a professional counselor at PAS by calling 800-356-0845. Counselors are available 24/7.

Adapted from Robert Intveld, *Fostering Resilience after a Critical Incident*.