



Igniting the Discussion of Mental Wellness for First Responders
First Alarm Wellness, A Family Counseling Corporation

The Elbow Patch: Ponderings from your Firehouse Therapist(s)!

COVID Chaos- March 16, 2020

As emergency responders you are on the front lines responding to the COVID pandemic. Administering aid to possible COVID patients is a frightening feeling. Reports of increasing positive cases, including FF's and other medical staff, mistrust of what is and is not being reported and scarcity of resources: tests, medical supplies, food and toilet paper add intensity to those feelings.

Schools closing, activities being canceled, homeschooling your children... not being there to help, or at home fearful you may expose them and make them ill. All legitimate concerns. We are living through an extraordinary event in our society and taking unprecedented steps to lessen the impact.

We are never in 100% control. You didn't take this job because you are someone who likes to watch from the sidelines. In the midst of this COVID health crisis, let us remember that there are many things we cannot change (this horse is out of the barn), but we can influence our PERSPECTIVE.

Identify the thoughts that may be feeding our feelings of fear, evaluating their truthfulness and shifting our mindset from "we're all screwed" to "this sucks but we can handle this" will be emotionally and physically protective.

Things to consider:

- **Look to history to remember we've survived pandemics in the past.**
- **Validity of a resource/reporter.** Who is it? What is their role? What may bias the information that they are reporting to me? What do they have to gain if I accept their information or way of thinking?
- **Critically review information presented on graphs and statistics as reported.** Manipulating infographics is a common marketing tool. Omitting baselines, flipping the axis, and using a scale that is too small or too big, skipping numbers, not starting at zero can each really skew what a graph visually looks like and incorrectly represent the facts. Sometimes data is left out or the graph isn't labeled properly.
- **Diversify where and from whom you seek information.** Listen to those with opposing viewpoints. Challenge your thinking.
- **Understand how the information pertains to YOU.** News often is reported to respond to the masses and can be overgeneralized.
- **Controlling your stress level- Limit watching and reading of the news.** Informed but not obsessive. Over information can be harmful. Especially if you have children. Remember they hear even when they pretend they are not listening, and they watch you for cues on how they should be feeling.
- **Add in stress reducing activities** such as exercise, deep breathing and muscle relaxation practices, meditation, hot showers, coloring, keep a gratitude journal, etc.
- **Focus on the things you can control.** Wash your hands, trim your nails, get the best sleep you can and fuel your body well. Maintain as much of a routine and schedule to the day as you can. We adults thrive on consistency and boundaries just as much as the kids.

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- **Make the most of the present time.** For many of us being told we can't do something is a challenge to do exactly that. Take this 'forced' time to slow down, play cards, reconnect with family and friends and have a (phone/video) conversation. Do things that make this a blessing and not a punishment. Be creative and think outside the box!
- **Don't make any significant or impulsive decisions.** Everyone is under stress right now. Save the big decisions for when this subsides (and it will).
- **If you are feeling anxiety, anger or sadness that seems more than others around you, consider if this experience is triggering memories of a past event.**
- **Parents: your children need you to lead and model for them!**
 - They don't have the life experience or the skills to differentiate between the good and the bad information that surrounds them. They know that people are sick, and that some are dying. Explain that most people who get sick, won't need to go to the hospital and are not at risk of dying. We have spread ourselves out in an effort to slow down how fast people are getting sick so that those that do need additional care aren't showing up at the doctors all at the same time.
 - They have been separated from their friends and routines. Collaborate on a daily schedule mixed with structure and free time. Help them connect with friends over the phone and with video chats.
 - Get outside! Move, explore... the world isn't dangerous, people aren't dangerous.
 - Engage your kids in an age appropriate conversation. Reassure them that they can ask you anything- you won't be scared or mad at their asking. Don't just talk- model and mentor behavior and actions.
 - Focus on lessons that we have learned from this experience such as being prepared for emergencies, not wasting food/supplies, practicing good hygiene, and taking care of our bodies to keep our immune system strong.
 - Offer assurance that while we're not sure how long all these changes will last- they will end. History can guarantee us of that.
- **Be familiar with the symptoms of COVID and be aware of your body.** Get evaluated by a doctor as soon as possible if you begin to feel ill. Not everyone will be tested, if you aren't feeling well- assume that COVID is the culprit and take appropriate precautions for yourself and the people surrounding you.

If you or a family member would like to talk- we are here to support you. Video, phone or text. Need some ideas on how to have conversations, address fearful feelings... complain about the dishwasher being loaded inefficiently. We're here.

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