

Coping During Times of Uncertainty

National Wildfire Coordinating Group

Mental Health Sub-Committee, Risk Management Committee



Stress and the COVID-19 Pandemic

There are several ways [COVID-19](#) are impacting the wildland fire community related to mental health and well-being.

The [added levels of stress](#) from the pandemic, frustration from the changes in policies, procedures, organizational pressures, along with the regular day-to-day challenges we face is becoming overwhelming. And it is fire season. Everyday decisions in the field now have become even more critical. COVID-19 has added a new reality that few ever deemed possible.

Many firefighters worry that they might be exposed at work or on a fire and bring the new coronavirus back to the station, inadvertently infecting their crew, or taking it home to their families. Concerns run high that this respiratory illness could be a career-altering or career-ending sickness. These are unknown times, but yes, we are at a heightened risk of getting sick due to the job.

Sometimes, the psychological fear of the disease is worse than the disease itself. These issues should be a concern for us, and we need to ensure that this does not slowly become a mental health concern.

COVID-19 and Families

We protect our friends and loved ones from anxiety and worry by not openly discussing the dangers of firefighting and how we manage the risks or threats. But knowing you are going to enter another potentially hazardous health environment and that you could go home and infect them is new, added stress.

Our friends and loved ones already ask questions about fire assignments, which is often the last thing we want to talk about. Be prepared for more questions about the job. Where you have gone, whom you interacted with, and what precautions you are taking. Be patient and communicate with them; otherwise, they may feel distanced or ignored, which can lead to resentment.

Reassure friends and loved ones by showing you are informed about the risk and that you are taking every possible precaution to keep yourself healthy. Take extra effort to reduce the amount of the “outside world” you bring into the home. Explain how you are looking out for your safety and theirs by not immediately sharing a hug. Provide as much explanation as is appropriate to calm fears and create a feeling of security.

A Word About COVID-19 and Information

Information overload, rumors, and misinformation can make your life feel out of control and unclear about what to do. Response to misinformation is not handled well and leads to a battle of opinions rather than an exchange of knowledge. Take the time to review [factual information about COVID-19](#). Find information and answers which will give you a sense of control that a pandemic can easily take away. Information is not always shared efficiently and does not always reach remote outstations, people without email, access to the internet, or the fire line. Try to reach those who will benefit the most from accurate and current information and seek it out if you do not receive it.

Coping with Stress: Short Term

During the COVID-19 pandemic, you may experience stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, and loneliness. And mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression, can worsen. Fear and worry about getting sick, where, and how to get safe food, clean water, and exposure to personnel from other areas can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions.

Even if the mental health system could treat everyone, most people do not seek care, instead, turning to alcohol and drugs. Some withdraw, becoming more isolated. Some become angry and uncontrollably violent or self-destructive.

The best thing we can do is figure out how to tolerate stress and distress. It is helpful to go online to learn about "[distress tolerance skills](#)" which involve accepting that some problems are beyond one's control. Instead of becoming caught up in feelings of unfairness and anger, people can learn healthier ways of thinking and coping when they cannot escape painful situations.

Crisis Leadership

Positive, capable, caring leaders recognize the needs of those they serve and determine how to help them most effectively. In these uncertain and highly stressful times, there is heightened reliance on managers and supervisors to maintain the well-being, health, and safety of the workforce.

[Leaders during crisis](#) perform roles like never before while also managing their mounting work-life challenges and staying informed about rapidly changing policies. They must keep from overreacting to yesterday's developments and focus on looking ahead. It feels like a lot because it is.

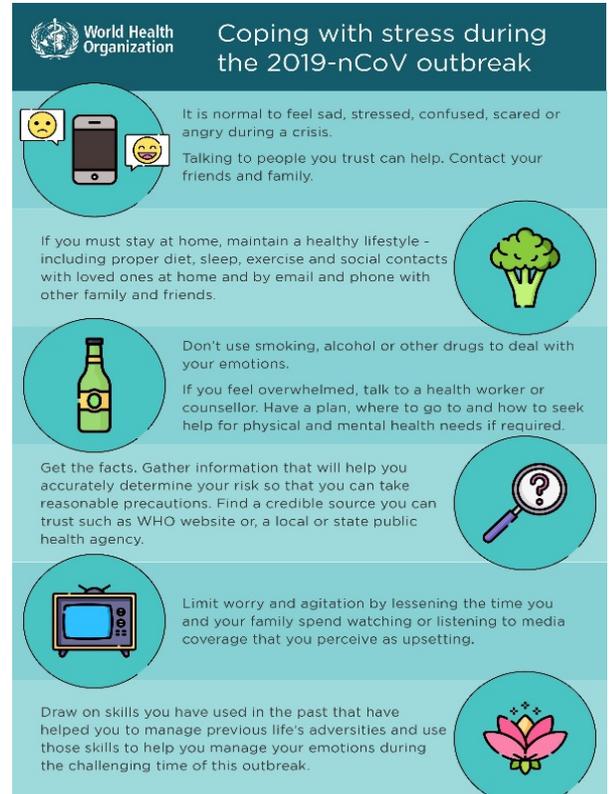
[Extreme stress can affect](#) the way we act. Identify and access the actions and behaviors that make you a more thoughtful and effective leader. Whether that involves making time for activities that restore your energy, pursuing the space you need to gain perspective, or simply ensuring that you are getting the sleep you need. In short, find balance.

Addressing Stigma

[Stigma](#) is the negative association between a person or group of people who contracted the disease. In an outbreak, this may mean people are labeled, stereotyped, discriminated against, treated separately, and or experienced loss of status because of a disease's perceived link.

When talking about coronavirus disease, certain words (suspect case, presumed COVID, isolation...) and language may have a negative meaning for people and fuel stigmatizing attitudes. Stigma can drive people to hide the illness to avoid discrimination or prevent people from seeking health care.

Everyone can help stop stigma related to COVID-19 by [knowing the facts](#) and sharing them with others in your community. Research literature, education, and contact are useful strategies for addressing stigma. https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/cerccorner/article_123016.asp



World Health Organization

Coping with stress during the 2019-nCoV outbreak

It is normal to feel sad, stressed, confused, scared or angry during a crisis. Talking to people you trust can help. Contact your friends and family.

If you must stay at home, maintain a healthy lifestyle - including proper diet, sleep, exercise and social contacts with loved ones at home and by email and phone with other family and friends.

Don't use smoking, alcohol or other drugs to deal with your emotions. If you feel overwhelmed, talk to a health worker or counsellor. Have a plan, where to go to and how to seek help for physical and mental health needs if required.

Get the facts. Gather information that will help you accurately determine your risk so that you can take reasonable precautions. Find a credible source you can trust such as WHO website or, a local or state public health agency.

Limit worry and agitation by lessening the time you and your family spend watching or listening to media coverage that you perceive as upsetting.

Draw on skills you have used in the past that have helped you to manage previous life's adversities and use those skills to help you manage your emotions during the challenging time of this outbreak.

Seeking Help

If a heightened sense of crisis or panic is a little more than you prepared for, reach out.

[Talk to someone](#). Reach out to a peer or other resource to vent and tell them all your worries and concerns. Take the opportunity to let someone listen to you, and who will not judge you.

The expansion of [telehealth](#) during the pandemic has been a bright spot in mental health treatment.

American Telepsychiatry

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-telepsychiatry>

National Alliance on Mental Illness

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/April-2020/Coronavirus-Mental-Health-Treatment>

University of Michigan

<https://mari.umich.edu/news/mental-health-during-coronavirus>

COVID Resource Guidelines

<https://www.samhsa.gov/>