

Public Safety Resilience During a Pandemic

San Mateo County CISM Team – March 2020
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The way Public Safety Personnel respond to pressure, call it stress, is a condition that all humans experience. Unfortunately, we often find that we are reluctant to reveal our true feelings and emotions while “on the job” or to our family members. We want to protect others and our loved ones from what we accept as the ugly parts of our job. The younger ones among us often are more open and honest about sharing thoughts and feelings; the rest of us are coming to accept that talking helps. It's ok to be human. Talking relieves stress, builds friendships and trust while making work more worthwhile. We're past the days of having to “Stuff it” or “Tough it out”.

For Public Safety Employees, a Pandemic Environment is a super-charged version of a day with an exceptional number of medical incidents. We rely on our training, processes, procedures and each other to maintain normalcy. Things we viewed as normal look very different in our communities. We will make changes faster than we are accustomed. This can also be stressful. As this becomes long-term there may be varying factors that can complicate our personal responses to the world around us. A public that ignores emergency mandates, reducing amounts of Personnel Protective Equipment (PPE), increasing hours on-duty and the chance that we, co-workers or family will succumb to the effects of this virus are not pleasant thoughts. We will most likely be impacted by the high levels of grief displayed by those we serve amongst the new problems our communities will suffer. Recovery may be difficult for everyone in their own ways.

Fear, Worry, Anxiety, Irritability and Blame amongst many other “Feelings” are natural responses to threats. Any of these listed emotions above can easily be perceived as threats to what we consider our “Norms.” How we treat each other is critical to both our personal and group success. I'm sure many of you are already wondering “is this really happening” and trying to balance the facts provided with visions of Disaster and Science Fiction movies we have seen over the years.

We usually accept what is coming at us knowing it will only last a period of minutes or hours. Never have we been asked to deal with an event like what we are entering now. We will all need to take actions to remain “balanced” over the next few months.

Things we can do to maintain balance:

Choose how we receive and share information – Utilize various sources for public and professional information. Often the news media and social media sensationalize information using entertainment principles rather than the ethical reporting of facts. Just because it's on the internet does not make it true. Try distancing yourself from the media or put yourself on a diet of time spent with information input. Remember that constantly exposing ourselves to this input can

have a detrimental impact on how we respond to each other, ourselves and the public. Decide which sources you are going to trust.

Realize that new habits may be required

Accepting new habits is hard. As we adapt to our new (and hopefully temporary) normal aspects of our lives things will continue to change. How we conduct our work, shopping, family activities, socializing may be unique and challenging. Possible separation from loved ones and friends can create feelings of isolation when you need contact the most. Constantly having children at home can alter relationships. New habits may be needed to address changes based upon logic. Don't tell yourself (or others) "You Should" do something, convert the idea into "I am Choosing to do X so that I feel more energy, stay healthy, help my peers, care for my loved ones". Accept that others may have solutions to problems that are better than your own. Accept that a team moves more successfully than a group of individuals. Be gentle with yourself and recognize that all change is stressful, but not necessarily bad.

Physical / Self Care is Important

Exercise to relieve stress through physical exertion. Many of us realize that stress causes the brain to tell the body to release chemicals into our bloodstreams. Epinephrine, Adrenaline, Dopamine, Cortisol and others address what we commonly refer to as the "Fight or Flight" reactions. We have needed these chemicals since the caveman days to protect ourselves and deal with critical situations. In Public Safety we are often unaware that this chemical manufacturing process is occurring because it has become our normal condition. Repeatedly responding to traumatic events can lead to a build up of these chemicals that need to be "burnt off". Often our decision-making processes, relationship concerns and how we view the world can be directly tied to the abundance of stress hormones and chemicals in our bodies. Exercise in any form is an excellent way to reduce the impact of these chemicals and return our systems to a more manageable level. In the longer term, exercise will turn stress into strength and assist us in a longer, healthier life by balancing them with naturally produced recovery hormones.

Likewise, getting rest (especially sleep) will assist in maintaining clear reasoning abilities and alertness to function in our public safety roles. Sleep lowers your cortisol level and gives your brain time to process difficult memories, so that they don't linger. Positive social interactions – relaxing and talking with people you can respect assists in relaxing and raising recovery hormones.

Lastly, self-care has to include diet. Try and ensure you get enough healthy calories spread out throughout the day. That's not to say your favorite distraction can't be eaten, just try and make sure the body is fueled with the foods it needs and not just the ones you crave. Proteins, vegetables and fruits are best of course but even a power bar once in a while can keep you going.

Awareness and Acceptance of Past Trauma

Many of us have seen the worst of what the world has to offer. It is ok to acknowledge that some of the incidents we have experienced stay with us and change us. Sometimes we wonder "what

if” or “had this happened” things would have been different. Occasionally we see something that reminds us of past incidents. I like to look upon these moments as stones that we place in an imaginary backpack. We unconsciously store them there, so we don’t have to think about them. We all carry a backpack! Sudden, big changes and uncertainty can cause you to remember past experiences and feelings. It’s normal but can be troublesome or even debilitating. These realizations can cause people to be irritable or angry, express unplanned emotions, or behave in manners not usually expected. Please be patient with yourself and others. Take breaks, appreciate a few deep breaths, stretch. Unpack stress by talking about how you feel with a trusted confidant. Be the safe person for others to discuss what’s on their minds if you are able too.

Lastly, if your agency, City or County provides access to a Critical Incident Stress Management Team trained in assisting Public Safety Personnel don’t be reluctant to utilize their services. They exist to help you and the organization bounce back from difficult incidents, to maintain a workplace that remains operationally by addressing concerns not covered in the policies manual. Chaplains who know your agency can also be a helpful resource.

These may be long and difficult times. Many of you have experienced other occasions in our careers where our emotions may have been heightened. We have weathered the HIV/Aids scare, Terrorism and 9-11 attacks, as well as the recent Fentanyl concerns. I know we can rely on each other to get through this too.

I know our CISM Team will make every effort to assist whenever requested during this period as we return to whatever the new normal will be. Don’t hesitate to reach out for individual peer support or group debriefings. Call San Mateo County Communications (PSC) and ask for a CISM callout, We normally respond to your call within minutes.

San Mateo County Critical Incident Stress Management Team