

# Managing PTSD Risk for First Responders

First responders face unique repeated exposures to danger, hazards, death, injury, loss, threats to personal safety, long work hours, physical demands and other challenges. The nature of their work puts them at higher than average risk for stress, PTSD symptoms, depression, substance use, and suicide ideation and attempts. The duties of first responders often involve putting others' needs above their own, but this does not have to come at a sacrifice to mental health and wellness. The following strategies have been found to have protective factors that can help guard against the cumulative impacts of exposure to distressing events that can result in PTSD symptoms and other mental health issues.

## PREPARING FOR YOUR ASSIGNMENT

- Train hard and know your job well. Increase your sense of trust in yourself to perform your job by obtaining any specialized training to equip you with the skills you need. Feel ready and prepared.
- Participate in simulations and mock exercises. This will increase your sense of mastery of your job.
- Increase your sense of trust in your team. Work with your colleagues to increase your team capabilities so you can feel assured that your team has your back.
- Gather as much information as you can. Before arriving at the scene, address any concerns related to well-being and safety.

## DURING YOUR ASSIGNMENT

- Put your self-care plan in place. Be aware of situations that are making you feel more vulnerable. Recognize signs of burnout and compassion fatigue. Have a stress control plan mapped out for self-care, especially if the event is prolonged or significantly disturbing. At a minimum, take breaks, fuel yourself, and get adequate restorative sleep.
- Support each other. Leaders should recognize good work during an event and empower staff. Have a plan for checking in with one another.
- Apply resiliency strategies in the moment. We all adapt to stressors differently in the moment. Look into trainings on building resilience to strengthen your psychological ability to handle taxing situations.

## AFTER THE ASSIGNMENT

- Develop strong social supports. Those who feel a sense of camaraderie among coworkers and describe their leaders as approachable have less risk of developing PTSD symptoms. There are huge benefits to peer support and bonding with colleagues after an incident.

## AFTER THE ASSIGNMENT (CONTINUED)

- Address personal life issues. Things going on in your life outside of work, such as relationship difficulties can be further impacted by a stressful work assignment. Consider seeking professional help before things spiral.
- Limit your screen time. Responders that watched more than four hours of TV per day in the month following a disaster were more likely to develop PTSD symptoms. This may be because they spent this time alone instead of engaged with others. Media coverage of an event can also cause unnecessary stress.
- Don't avoid thinking about the incident. Take part in talks with your teammates to vent frustrations or difficulties that came up during a response and get these feelings off your chest. There are also peer and support groups of first responders who can relate and help process what you've experienced.
- Take time off when needed. Working long hours or in demanding circumstances without taking adequate time off to decompress can lead to fatigue, mental distress, job dissatisfaction and health complaints.

Enlisting all of the above strategies can be very helpful in reducing PTSD risk. However, consider seeking professional assistance if you experience a pattern of one or more of the following signs and symptoms:

- Distressing memories of traumatic events
- Nightmares
- Irritability, angry outbursts, or aggressive behavior
- Isolating self from family, close friends and coworkers
- Feeling "on guard" for prolonged periods when there is no reasonably identifiable threat
- Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Feelings of overwhelming guilt or shame
- Being easily startled or frightened
- Self-destructive behavior

Your Employee Assistance Program is available 24/7 for free, professional, confidential assistance at the number below.

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*SAMHSA ([www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)) – First Responders: Behavioral Health Concerns, Emergency Response, and Trauma; Tips for Disaster Responders: Preventing and Managing Stress.*

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) – Emergency Responders: Tips for Taking Care of Yourself*



### Your Employee Assistance Program

Anytime, any day, you have free, confidential access to professional consultants and online resources to help you be your best. To access these services, call or log on to get started.

**TOLL-FREE:**  
1.833.430.6028

**WEBSITE:**  
[www.EAPHelplink.com](http://www.EAPHelplink.com)

**CODE:**  
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