

# COVID-19: Stress Awareness, Management

The COVID-19 challenge is adding to the stress load many of us carry each day and can overload our ability to manage it if we don't pay attention. Don't let it defeat you in any way.

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<b>READY</b> (Green)	<b>REACTING</b> (Yellow)	<b>INJURED</b> (Orange)	<b>ILL</b> (Red)
<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Optimal functioning</li> <li>◇ Adaptive growth</li> <li>◇ Wellness</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ At one's best</li> <li>◇ Well-trained and prepared</li> <li>◇ In control</li> <li>◇ Physically, mentally and spiritually fit</li> <li>◇ Mission-focused</li> <li>◇ Motivated</li> <li>◇ Calm and steady</li> <li>◇ Having fun</li> <li>◇ Behaving ethically</li> </ul>	<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Mild and transient distress or impairment</li> <li>◇ Always goes away</li> <li>◇ Low risk</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Feeling irritable, anxious or down</li> <li>◇ Loss of motivation</li> <li>◇ Loss of focus</li> <li>◇ Difficulty sleeping</li> <li>◇ Muscle tension or other physical changes</li> <li>◇ Not having fun</li> </ul> <p><b>CAUSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Any stressor</li> </ul>	<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ More severe and persistent distress or impairment</li> <li>◇ Leaves a scar</li> <li>◇ Higher risk</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Loss of control</li> <li>◇ Panic, rage or depression</li> <li>◇ No longer feeling like normal self</li> <li>◇ Excessive guilt, shame or blame</li> </ul> <p><b>CAUSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Life threat</li> <li>◇ Loss</li> <li>◇ Moral injury</li> <li>◇ Wear and tear</li> </ul>	<p><b>DEFINITION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Clinical mental disorder</li> <li>◇ Unhealed stress injury causing life impairment</li> </ul> <p><b>FEATURES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ Symptoms persist and worsen over time</li> <li>◇ Severe distress or social or occupational impairment</li> </ul> <p><b>TYPES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ PTSD</li> <li>◇ Depression</li> <li>◇ Anxiety</li> <li>◇ Substance abuse</li> </ul>

In our day to day life, no matter what our profession is, or if you're a student, fast-food worker, parent, care-giver, etc. – it doesn't matter. Each of us has an average day-to-day stress load we're used to dealing with. Some people deal with that daily stress better than others, and some folks deal with greatly increased levels of stress with ease. What we need to address is how the added stress of a pandemic can negatively impact your usual stress management skills and alter how you behave. There is nothing wrong with this adjustment in behavior, but you need to

at least be aware of it and do what you can to minimize it for your own health and wellness.

In the law enforcement world, we deal with daily stressors that many if not most folks can't imagine dealing with at all... ever in their lives. The necessity of on-going situational awareness, while it might stress "normal" people, helps law enforcement professionals reduce the stress they perceive or feel. That reality for law enforcement doesn't apply to all professions though and even those of us with high stress management skills might feel a bit overwhelmed. Why? Because of the add on stress of the unknown.

This morning it was observed in one conversation that there's a distinct difference between the stress of potentially being shot / shot at, and the stress of not knowing whether or not you'll be infected by or exposed to COVID-19. Why would that be? For law enforcement, simple situational awareness and the practice of good officer survival skills can reduce your chances of being shot or shot at. It's a known risk. It's relatively minimal (depending on where you work). The chance of surviving it even if it happens is high. It's an accepted and recognized part of the job. It exists in whatever minimal form from day one of the job until you retire and possibly even after that dependent on your outlook toward lifestyle in retirement.

COVID-19 on the other hand... You can't see it. You don't know where it is. You can exercise good risk management practices 100% and still not know whether or not you've been exposed. If you happen to get infected, symptoms might not show up for as much as ten to fourteen days – or they might not show up at all. At present, there seems no end in sight for how long this threat might be actively part of our day, or if it will ever be mitigated by vaccine or cure.

Let's take a look at the attached Stress Continuum Model. This image is available from about a hundred different online sources and resides in the public domain of every social media outlet this author can find. All things being equal, most officers operate in the green, even while at work. With the addition of the daily stress from the COVID-19 concerns and changes in operations, we might find ourselves in the Yellow space

instead. That's not terrible and if we're aware of it, we can mitigate or resolve it during our off-duty time or with proper self-care (to the best of our ability) on duty.

Our concern should be raised if we feel that we're already operating in the Yellow space day to day and the addition of the COVID-19 situational impact drops us into the Orange space. This can have a longer term impact as well as impairing our function during our day-to-day life and duty. The most common and obvious way to address such stress matters is, "Talk to someone; seek professional help." The additional challenge of COVID-19 restrictions is that they may well prevent such face to face counseling opportunities.

Just this morning (as this is published) this author was talking to a police psychologist headquartered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who is conducting counseling and therapeutic sessions virtually by using the ZOOM meeting app.

What we must do is stay aware and take appropriate action to avoid dropping into the RED space. For all of us who normally exist and function in the Green space, dropping into the Yellow during this prolonged time of additional challenge isn't out of the ordinary. We need to be aware of it and make sure we practice good stress management / mitigation behaviors while off-duty. If we feel ourselves getting overwhelmed and potentially dropping into the Orange space we must immediately seek assistance and support BEFORE it negatively impacts our behavior and our performance on duty.

Here are a few things you can do to assist in maintaining a positive outlook and/or reducing the impact of all the negative "news":

- Minimize the negative saturation in your day. Look at infection numbers no more than twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening.
- Make sure that when you look at the COVID-19 infection data you pay attention to the number of negative tests and recoveries as much as, if not more than, the numbers of infected or deaths.

- See between the sensationalistic headlines and commentary to the actual facts. News media outlets habitually use language and sentence structure that makes things sound worse than they are. It's how they keep people coming back or staying glued to the TV screen. It's how they increase their ratings and therefore advertising revenues. Don't buy into the hype, but pay attention to the data reported that is supported factually.
- Assess your own health and risk. The risk of serious challenge from a COVID-19 infection is much higher for those over 60 years of age or who have other pre-existing health conditions. Be realistic about your own risk, both positive and negative.
- Set the example in your community by practicing the recommended prevention protocols related to COVID-19: wash your hands frequently; avoid touching your face, particularly any area with mucus / moist membranes. Maintain a six foot minimum space when talking to people (haven't we always done this as "reactionary gap?").
- Don't feed the hype or panic. As you serve your community, be the voice of reason.

We are all in this together and we can all come out of it together if we support one another and maintain ourselves properly. That doesn't just mean avoiding infection but also taking care of yourself emotionally, mentally and physically.

Stay safe.