

# Self-care and COVID-19 exposure for first responder families

First responders are on the front lines of our nation's response to COVID-19. The challenges they face are immense and the toll of their work on themselves and their families can be significant. This page contains suggestions to help families of first responders cope during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Signs of burnout and stress

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), first responders may experience burnout and secondary traumatic stress during prolonged exposure to emergencies.

### Burnout

Feelings of extreme exhaustion and being overwhelmed.

### Secondary traumatic stress

Stress reactions and symptoms resulting from exposure to another individual's traumatic experiences, rather than from exposure directly to a traumatic event.

Recognize the signs of both of these conditions in yourself and the responder(s) in your family to be sure those who need a break or need help can address these needs.

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#### Signs of burnout

#### Signs of secondary traumatic stress

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Sadness, depression or apathy.

Excessive worry or fear about something bad happening.

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Feeling like:

Feeling easily startled, or "on guard" all of the time.

- A failure
- Nothing you can do will help.
- You are not doing your job well.
- You need alcohol/other drugs to cope.

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Having nightmares or recurrent thoughts about the traumatic situation.

[Learn more and view the full list of signs](https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp) (https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/responders.asp) .

## Tips for self-care

Coping techniques like taking breaks, eating healthy foods, exercising and using the buddy system can help prevent and reduce burnout and secondary traumatic stress. The CDC recommends:

- Taking breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories, including social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
- Taking care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate. Try to eat healthy and well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Making time to unwind. Try to do some other activities you enjoy.
- Connecting with others. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling. (This can be done while maintaining social distance).

[Learn more about managing stress and anxiety](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html) .

## What to do if the first responder in your home has been exposed

If the first responder in your family been exposed to a confirmed or suspected COVID patient and/or staff member, follow this CDC guidance: [Follow-up and/or Reporting Measures by EMS Clinicians After Caring for a PUI or Patient with Confirmed COVID-19](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-risk-assesment-hcp.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-risk-assesment-hcp.html)

To protect the people in your household, the responder may need to practice social distancing, quarantine or isolation. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines these terms as:

### Social distancing

A way to keep people from interacting closely or frequently enough to spread an infectious disease.

### Quarantine

Separates and restricts the movement of people who have been exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick. It lasts long enough to ensure the person has not contracted an infectious disease.

### Isolation

Prevents the spread of an infectious disease by separating people who are sick from those who are not. It lasts as long as the disease is contagious.

## Learn more

[Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health – Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Taking-Care-of-Your-Behavioral-Health-Tips-for-Social-Distancing-Quarantine-and-Isolation-During-an-Infectious-Disease-Outbreak/PEP20-01-01-007) (https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Taking-Care-of-Your-Behavioral-Health-Tips-for-Social-Distancing-Quarantine-and-Isolation-During-an-Infectious-Disease-Outbreak/PEP20-01-01-007) . Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

[If You Are Sick or Caring for Someone](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html) . CDC.

### **Related COVID-19 behavioral health content**

[Disaster Distress Helpline](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline) (https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline) (Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746). SAMHSA

### **Mental and Behavioral Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus Resources**

(https://www.phe.gov/emergency/events/COVID19/mental-behavioral-health/Pages/default.aspx) . Public Health Emergency

### **Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019**

(https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak\_factsheet\_1.pdf) . National Child Traumatic Stress Network

### **Talking With Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents and Teachers During Infectious Disease**

**Outbreaks** (https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talking-With-Children-Tips-for-Caregivers-Parents-and-Teachers-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/PEP20-01-01-006) . SAMHSA

### **Download this guidance**

(https://www.ems.gov/pdf/Federal\_Guidance\_and\_Resources/Personnel\_Health\_and\_Safety/Burnout\_Self-Care\_COVID-19\_Exposure\_for\_Families\_of\_First\_Responders.pdf)

This guidance was developed by the Federal Healthcare Resilience Task Force (HRTF). The HRTF is leading the development of a comprehensive strategy for the U.S. healthcare system to facilitate resiliency and responsiveness to the threats posed by COVID-19. The Task Force's EMS/Pre-Hospital Team is comprised of public and private-sector EMS and 911 experts from a wide variety of agencies and focuses on responding to the needs of the pre-hospital community. This team is composed of subject matter experts from NHTSA OEMS, CDC, FEMA, USFA, U.S. Army, USCG and non-federal partners representing stakeholder groups and areas of expertise. Through collaboration with experts in related fields, the team develops practical resources for field providers, supervisors, administrators, medical directors and associations to better respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Primary Point of Contact: NHTSA Office of EMS, nhtsa.ems@dot.gov, 202-366-5440