COVID-19 Guidance for Maintaining Healthy Incident Management and Emergency Response Teams

Purpose

This document provides guidance for enhancing and maintaining the resilience and wellbeing of incident management and emergency response teams during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations are based on research and best practices for disaster responders and team leaders.

Included in this document is information on increasing both team and personal resilience during a long-lasting disaster, de-escalating team conflict, compassion fatigue and burnout, and returning from activation. This document is written primarily for incident management and response team leaders to help mitigate the behavioral health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their teams and themselves, and to uphold a resilient and sustainable workforce.

Background

Resilience is the ability to recover from difficult circumstances. The topic of resilience has been widely studied, with most of the focus on individuals who have risen above adversity or trauma. More recently, attention has turned to high achievers who may also have a history of significant adversity or trauma,[1] but nevertheless thrive in difficult situations and "actively seek to engage in challenging situations that present opportunities for them to raise their performance level."[2]

Some individuals who choose challenging professions, such as healthcare, law enforcement, sports, and emergency and disaster response, not only cope with stressful work, but also thrive in these roles. Both organizational and personal factors lead to sustained success and growth in spite of jobs involving hard work, years of preparation, overwhelming emotional exposure, and many failures.

Incident management and emergency response teams in particular may be at higher risk for behavioral health impacts due to their exposure to difficult situations, such as people dealing with limited resources, people suffering from a disaster or emergency, and fatigue related to the challenging conditions of response roles. Developing resilience in teams—especially for long-lasting responses—is essential to positive outcomes for team members.

Key Considerations

Team leaders and supervisors can support healthy teams by:

- Creating and sustaining an environment where team members know they are valued, and they feel appreciated.
- Creating a system for recognizing team efforts and accomplishments during team or one-on-one meetings.
- Promoting fairness and work balance when assigning projects and tasks, especially in higher stress roles.
- Managing the negative impacts response work can have on team members, including pressures around responsiveness and expectations.
- Helping and advocating for team members if the work culture is one where saying "no" is discouraged.
- Encouraging and modeling healthy boundaries around on-duty and off-duty expectations. Breaks should intentionally be part of work schedules. Encourage and remind team members to take breaks. As a team leader, model by taking breaks yourself.
- Managing anger and de-escalating conflict between team members.
- Modeling and teaching team members how to approach problems from a variety of perspectives.
- Providing regular opportunities for team members to check-in and talk about how they are feeling and doing in their jobs.
  - When feasible, a way to do this is by scheduling a short (e.g., 15-minute) team check-in at the end of shift. Encourage team members to participate in, but do not require, sharing how they are doing, and reporting on what went well and lessons learned during their shift.[3,4]
  - Team leaders may also want to make time for individual check-ins with their team members, particularly if they observe someone who appears to be struggling.

Organizational, Team, and Personal Resilience

Resilience relies on the following key ingredients:

1. **Flexibility** and **adaptability** to change
2. **Connection** to others through strong, healthy relationships
3. Having a sense of **purpose** by living in alignment with your core values
4. Focusing on **hope** by giving attention to positive possibilities for the future

Four Ingredients of Resilience

HOPE + CONNECTION + PURPOSE + ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY = RESILIENCE
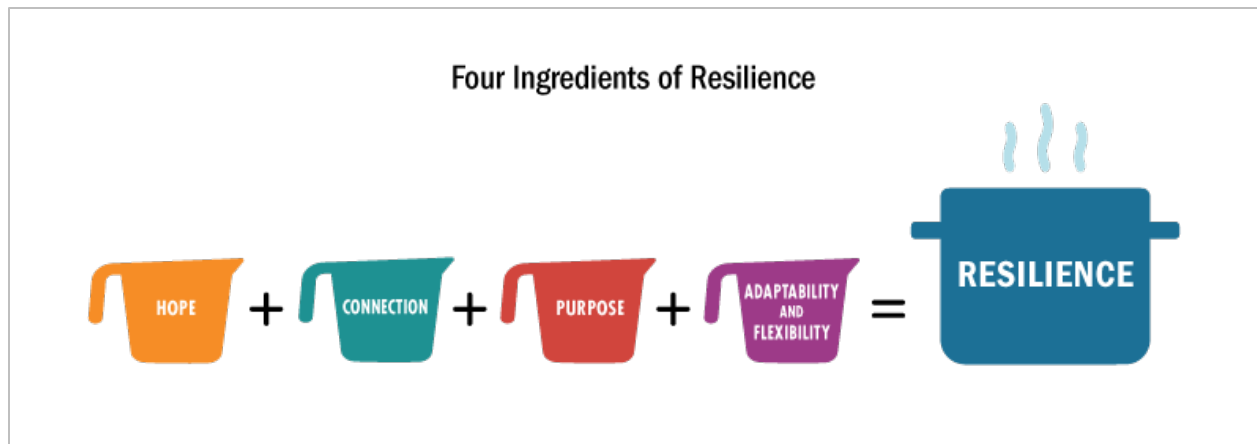
Organizational Resilience

Organizational resilience depends on:[5,6]

- Developing shared **trust** and **interdependence** among employers and employees.
- The organization's ability to **learn** and **adapt** to lessons learned.
- Human Resources **flexibility** for work schedules and boundaries, time off, and job roles.
- **Open, two-way communication** among leadership and staff at all levels about expectations and goals.

Team Resilience

To promote team resilience:[7]

- When possible, keep team members within the same team during an activation to increase work continuity for members, rather than rotating team members among a variety of teams.
- Limit on-duty hours to no more than 12 hours per day.
- Limit on-duty rotation to no more than two weeks without a break of at least 2–3 rest days.
- Rotate team members between high and low stress work functions or job tasks if possible.
- Encourage your team to monitor and track their exposure to particularly high stress events. Team members should develop personal coping plans to follow during times of extreme stress.
- Provide the opportunity for, but do not require, team members to talk about their feelings and experiences during activation.
- Share your own feelings and experiences as a leader.
- Encourage teams to participate in memorials and rituals for persons who have lost their lives, such as those in the affected community or team members.

- Encourage your team to stay in touch with their close social supports, such as family and friends.
- If team members appear stressed, encourage use of organizational support services, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or Peer Support Program.
- Monitor your team members for signs of troublesome substance use. Refer to the tip sheet for help identifying substance misuse[*] from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Signs may include showing up at work with alcohol on breath or being impaired or hungover, or employee reports of increased drinking or cannabis use.

Additional Resources

If you lead or support response teams in higher risk occupations, such as healthcare, behavioral health, law enforcement, education, etc., see Washington's COVID-19 Behavioral Health Group Impact Reference Guide[†] for occupation-specific behavioral health considerations, risk factors, and recommended support strategies.

For additional information on how to support the well-being of you and your team, see the Guidance on Basic Psychosocial Skills – A Guide for COVID-19 Responders[‡] from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Annex A of this guide provides advice for managers and supervisors.

Personal Resilience

Personal resilience relies on:[2,8]

- The capacity of those who work in demanding environments to thrive.[8]
- An attitude of curiosity and willingness to learn (i.e., the ability to accept differing opinions and alter direction as needed).
- A willingness to adapt and be flexible when job duties or expectations change.
- Adequate emotional control and the ability to acknowledge and self-regulate stress.
- A sense of optimism and hope.

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[*] https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4874.pdf

[†] https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/BHG-COVID19BehavioralHealthGroupImpactReferenceGuide.pdf

[‡] https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/iasc-guidance-basic

The REST Model[9]

It can be difficult to remain effective in your position and assist others if your own need for rest and respite are ignored. The REST Model is a simple tool to help increase your resilience. This model helps support healthy boundaries and the development of resilience through purpose, connection, and hope.

REST Model

Reward	Reward yourself for a job well done. Build supports into your work. For example, give yourself a break from the patterns and issues you deal with often. Take some time off or even just 15 minutes to do something you enjoy, such as watching a short video, going for a walk, or spending a few minutes doing a mindfulness exercise. Try to avoid rewards that include alcohol or drug use, as this can make job and personal stressors worse.
Establish	Set or establish healthy boundaries. Focus on keeping work at work and leaving it there. When you are off work, stick to that boundary. Do not bring work into your personal time or space. For example, for those who are working at home, this may mean moving work materials into another room or space. Say "no" to a request that conflicts with your boundaries, such as an expectation that you will answer work emails when off duty. Respectfully but firmly stick to set boundaries.
Share	Share your feelings, concerns, and stories. Do not hold things in. Participate in support and professional consultation groups. Consultation groups can provide opportunities to talk about work matters and offer social connection, which improves workplace resilience. Do not avoid talking about things that bother you. Enjoy the small things in life by focusing on spending time with your family or social group. Make time for connections and activities in your life.
Trust	Trust your support network and reach out as needed. Refer people elsewhere if you are too tired or emotionally unable to offer support. Trust that others are willing to help. If the issues seem larger or more serious, reach out for professional consultation and help. Keep a referral list of professional resources, such as your EAP and behavioral health professionals that you can go to when needed.

De-Escalating Team Conflict

Conflicts between teammates can be common, especially when stress levels are high. Different work and personality styles can lead to challenges. Team leaders should develop skills to assist in defusing conflict situations. The SAFE Model is a tool to assist anyone in a situation where conflict may need to be de-escalated.

SAFE Model[10]

Self	Tune in to yourself. Be aware of your own reactions (e.g., the tone of your voice, your body language, and your choice of words). Monitor yourself in order to stay calm and not take the situation personally, even if someone's words become personal. Non-verbal messages are particularly important. Be aware of the non-verbal cues that you are sending to the other person.
Area Awareness	Be aware of your physical area in case the conflict escalates. Notice the space and people around you. Your physical area includes people, exits, potential weapons, available help, and other resources. Do not position or keep yourself between an angry person and his or her exit. If they feel the need to leave the situation, access to a door or way to remove themselves is important.
Feelings	Use active listening techniques to identify what the angry person may be feeling underneath the anger. Remember that anger is usually about being afraid of something. By listening for feelings underneath anger, you can identify the cause of the emotions at the center of the issue. It is easier to empathize with someone who is angry when you understand what they may fear.
Engagement	If it is safe to do so, connect with the angry person by engaging to understand their story. Do not dismiss them or their concerns. Identify and engage resources or other people that may be able to address or help solve their problem or concern in some way. Engage support for yourself, especially if your job role involves dealing with an angry person or people. Do not keep a hostile interaction to yourself. Share it with others to get the support you need after dealing with a difficult person or situation. Engage your resources (friends, family, and other social supports) to increase your resilience.

Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

Challenging work environments, particularly those involving disasters and human tragedy or suffering, create situations with higher risk of compassion fatigue and job burnout.

Compassion fatigue is:

- Emotional and physical exhaustion leading to a diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others.
- Also described as secondary traumatic stress.

Burnout is:

- Exhaustion of body, mind, and motivation due to exposure to prolonged and unresolved work stress or frustration.
- Often a consequence of perceived disparity between the demands of the job and the resources that an employee has available to them.

Burnout can lead to many harmful consequences, including changes in the way people view themselves, their world, their purpose, and the future. Even the most resilient and well-balanced individuals can suffer emotionally and physically when they fail to take care of their own needs. Those with pre-existing mental health conditions should continue their current treatment and monitor for increased or worsening symptoms.[7]

REDUCING COMPASSION FATIGUE AND BURNOUT

Know the difference between empathy and sympathy

Empathy is understanding someone's emotions, such as distress, by viewing the situation from the other person's perspective. Empathy is important when supporting someone through a difficult time and enhances the relationship for both people. However, empathy also increases risk for the helper. As a helper, you could confuse the experiences of others (i.e., what they are going through) with your own story or sense about yourself and your experiences.

Sympathy is a feeling of care and concern for someone. Sympathy is a more distant response, whereas empathy involves connection. Empathy takes energy, which may lead to more fatigue and difficulty maintaining one's response role.

Tips for reducing compassion fatigue and burnout

- Eat nourishing meals, maintain healthy sleep habits, and move your body (e.g., yoga, running, dancing, stretching, chair exercises).
- Engage in and make time for activities that are completely different from work.
- Maintain and enhance interpersonal boundaries. This could mean telling someone that you can't take on a task, you don't have the energy to help them right away, or they are asking for something which conflicts with your values. In all of these situations, you could offer to find someone else who may be able to assist.
- Build and maintain supportive relationships with people outside of your job, if possible.

- Use spiritual practices that you enjoy and have found helpful in the past.
- Remind yourself of things that motivate you to increase your sense of purpose.
- Spend time outdoors when possible.
- Enhance your sense of control and detachment from your job. For example, remember that your job is what you do, but is not who you are.
- Talk with trusted and respected coworkers.
- Know your limits. Say "no" to tasks that will take away from your work-life balance. Ask others to help when reaching limits.
- Avoid confusing the stories of others (i.e., what they are going through) with your own story or sense about yourself and your experiences. For example, if you have a history of personal trauma, do not assume that the person you are talking with has the same experiences and emotional responses.
- Know your level of expertise and its limits.
- Manage self-care in the face of guilt, which can happen when you have more resources than those you are trying to assist, as well as when you are unable to meet all demands.
- Avoid overconsumption of alcohol and other substances.

After Activation

It is common to have psychological and physical impacts after an activation. Remind your team to watch for these signs:

- Increased negative mood
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical symptoms, such as headaches and stomachaches

Team members should be encouraged to seek support services, such as EAP or professional behavioral health services, if they notice they are experiencing unresolved or worsening symptoms.[11]

Getting Help

SUICIDE

If you or someone you know might be thinking about suicide:

- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you or someone you know needs help in emotional crisis:

- Call 866-4CRISIS. The [24-Hour Crisis Line](#) provides immediate help to individuals, families, and friends of people in emotional crisis. This line helps determine if you or your loved one needs professional consultation and can link you to the appropriate services.
- Text 741741. The free 24/7 support text line connects you with a crisis counselor to get you to a calm, safe place and provide you with a referral to further help, if needed.

STRESS OR EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

If you or someone you know is feeling stressed, anxious, or lonely due to COVID-19:

- Call [Washington Listens](#) at [1-833-681-0211](#) to speak with a support specialist who can help.

If you or someone you know is experiencing emotional distress, such as significant anxiety, panic, or sadness, related to a natural or human-caused disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic:

- SAMHSA's [Disaster Distress](#) Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support.

More COVID-19 Information and Resources

Stay up-to-date on the [current COVID-19 situation in Washington](#), [Governor Inslee's proclamations](#), [symptoms](#), [how it spreads](#), and [how and when people should get tested](#). See our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for more information.

A person's race/ethnicity or nationality does not, itself, put them at greater risk of COVID-19. However, data are revealing that communities of color are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. This is due to the effects of racism, and in particular, structural racism, that leaves some groups with fewer opportunities to protect themselves and their communities. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Share accurate information with others to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading.

- [WA State Department of Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (COVID-19)](#)
- [WA State Coronavirus Response (COVID-19)](#)
- [Find Your Local Health Department or District](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus (COVID-19)](#)
- [Stigma Reduction Resources](#)

Have more questions about COVID-19? Call our hotline: **1-800-525-0127,** Monday – Friday, 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., Weekends: 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. For interpretative services, **press #** when they answer and **say your language.** For questions about your own health, COVID-19 testing, or testing results, please contact a health care provider.

Acknowledgments

To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 (Washington Relay) or email civil.rights@doh.wa.gov.

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