

COVID-19: DISASTER MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES FOR HEALTH CARE EMPLOYEES

APRIL 2020

SAN FRANCISCO VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Contents:

- 1) Self-Care Strategies
- 2) Challenges & Realities for Front-Line Staff
- 3) Leading & Supervising Front-Line Staff
- 4) Wellness Resources for SFVAHCS Employees
- 5) Wellness Resources in the Community



PAUSE. THIS IS AN INCREDIBLY CHALLENGING TIME. YOU'RE DOING THE BEST YOU CAN.

We're in the midst of a **disaster response marathon**. It is expected that we will **move through this in phases** – initially running off adrenaline, proceeding to become irritable with others, having bouts of anxiety, and difficulty sleeping. This is normal, and **you will need to take breaks and pause**. A sprinter's pace is just not sustainable, and breaks also allow for an additional opportunity to **wash your hands**.

BREATHE. INHALE FOR 5, HOLD FOR 3, EXHALE FOR 5.

Slowing down your breath is incredibly effective at lowering your heart rate and calming your nervous system. **Pause and inhale through your nose while counting to 5**, and notice your stomach rise. **Hold your breath, while counting to 3**. **Exhale through your mouth, counting to 5** again. Repeat as many times as necessary.

FIND A WORK BUDDY, AND CHECK-IN DAILY.

Identify someone at work who is facing similar work and/or home challenges, and **check-in daily**. While social distancing is imperative to slowing this pandemic, connection to others is key to our mental health. The **check-in can be short** – just a reminder that you're not alone.

EXERCISE DAILY, EVEN IF JUST FOR A FEW MINUTES.

Exercise is key to mental and physical health. If you're feeling pressed for time and wondering how to possibly fit in exercise, consider a **10-min walk** while you check-in with your work buddy, or taking work calls/virtual meetings while walking or **stretching at your desk**.

PRACTICE HEALTHY SLEEPING HABITS, AS BEST AS YOU CAN GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

Getting good sleep can be **easier said than done**, especially when anxious, stressed, and/or depressed. When possible, **try to make your bedroom a stress-free zone**. Avoid using your phone, computer, or TV to read/watch stressful information while in bed. This will help **preserve your bed as a peaceful place** for rest and relaxation.

PRACTICE HEALTHY EATING HABITS, AS BEST AS YOU CAN GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

Keeping a **regular eating schedule** can help curb snack cravings. Be mindful of how hungry you are prior to eating. Make/choose meals and snacks with a **variety of nutrient-rich foods** such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, and dairy foods. **Stay hydrated** by drinking water, limit sugary and caffeinated beverages. **Wash hands** prior to preparing food.

COMMUNICATE YOUR CONCERNS AND NEEDS.

Communicate your concerns and what you need – for your work, mental and physical health, home life, etc. While your current needs may be largely practical – flexible working arrangements, leave questions, access to PPE - **remember your psychological needs too**.

LOOK INTO VARIOUS APPS, FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT AND SOCIAL CONNECTION.

Consider looking into **various apps that might be helpful** at this time – apps that support meditation, breathing, staying organized, acupuncture, sleep hygiene, exercise routines, etc. And of course, **stay virtually connected to your friends and family**.

BE KIND TO OTHERS, AND YOURSELF. THESE ARE TRYING TIMES FOR EVERYONE.

These are **incredibly trying times** – at work, at home, in our relationships, in our communities. Decisions will be made that you may disagree with. You may feel a **sense of loss**, as routines are severely interrupted and celebrations/gatherings are cancelled. **Kindness towards yourself, and others, is key** to maintaining our collective health.

COVID-19: CHALLENGES & REALITIES FOR FRONT-LINE STAFF

To our esteemed SFVAHCS Front-line Staff and Volunteers: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges and realities that you are facing are immense and intense. **Many have compared the experiences of front-line health care staff to the experience of war. You are on the front lines, and you are the warriors of this pandemic.** This disaster is unique, in that it is unfolding in your own lives, while you are also trying to care for others. You are ready for the challenge. Our Disaster Response Mental Health team is rapidly working to support leadership at all levels so they can, in turn, offer you and your colleagues the best support possible. **You are our heroes.** Below are 6 Tough Facts, adapted from the **Battlemind concepts**, to normalize and give credit to the experiences you may be having, **as you fight on the front lines of this pandemic.**

THIS IS DIFFICULT.

We know this: The number of those falling ill and/or dying from COVID-19, across the globe, is staggering. By the time this pandemic is over, **many of us will know someone** who was seriously ill or profoundly impacted.
Front-line staff can: Participate in regular **check-ins with your team/service**, engage in **self-care** activities when you are able to, and **talk to your team/close colleagues** about any challenges or problems.

THIS ENVIRONMENT IS DEMANDING.

We know this: This pace and environment will **take a toll on front-line staff** (physical strain, lack of sleep, long shifts, potential difficulty accessing resources). This will test the character of our staff and our leaders.
Front-line staff can: Aim to get **adequate sleep, stay hydrated, and utilize wellness resources** available/provided to you, when you are able. Stay informed. Monitor your own physical health ("**secure your oxygen mask first**") applies here – the care we provide to others will suffer if we do not take care of ourselves).

FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY ARE NOT SIGNS OF WEAKNESS.

We know this: **Stress response reactions** to disasters may include anxiety, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, anger, irritability, and avoidance of painful feelings and experiences.
Front-line staff can: Engage intently in **team/service trainings**. Though the intensity is higher, **remember, you have managed difficult situations before, and succeeded - you have the knowledge and skills.** Lean on each other, and ask for help. **Trust yourself and your team**, and be willing to **talk about your fears with trusted colleagues** – this is critical.

IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO ADMIT NEEDING MORE SUPPORT.

We know this: **Trauma-related responses are common** after large-scale disasters. Sometimes, this can lead to unhealthy coping strategies (increased substance use, change in dietary habits, aggression, etc.).
Front-line staff can: **Stay in touch with your work colleagues and friends** about how you are feeling, and pay attention to your own **coping strategies**, and those of others around you. You may recognize when your colleagues need additional support **before they do**. Encourage each other to seek additional support or mental health support if needed. The SFVAHCS Disaster Response Mental Health team will be providing ongoing resources. **EAP services are available to you and your household members, 24/7: 800-222-0364.**

FRONT-LINE RESPONSE PLACES A TREMENDOUS STRAIN ON FAMILIES.

We know this: Increasing stress, anxiety, and irritability, and fewer opportunities to stay involved in activities you enjoy, can cause **additional strains on your close relationships**. The stress of having older or vulnerable parents/partners/loved ones who may be at risk for serious COVID-19-related illness, and/or the additional stressor of school and daycare closures, may feel like an insurmountable challenge at home.
Front-line staff can: **Remember that these are not normal circumstances**, though the challenges and emotions you are experiencing (though maybe not typical for you), are completely normal in light of this crisis. **Practice kindness** towards yourself and others. Find a friend facing similar homelife challenges, and **check-in**.

TEAM COHESION AND STABILITY MAY BE DISRUPTED.

We know this: Your **relationships with your colleagues may be disrupted** by illness, competing home/work demands, emergency leave, family illness, etc. Changes in your own roles, as staff are shifted around to support gaps in services, may also impact the cohesion of your team and your daily routine.
Front-line staff can: **Recognize that your team may lose members** to these various factors and that **disruption is likely**. Identify and train back-up team members in the event you are unexpectedly out. Do your best to **welcome and train new team members**. It may be bumpy, but we have a **collective mission in mind**.

COVID-19: LEADING AND SUPERVISING FRONT-LINE STAFF

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges and realities faced by front-line staff are immense, and as a result, the stressors faced by our system's leaders are daunting. **Many have compared the experiences of front-line health care staff to the experience of war, and as such, your leadership through this battle is incredibly important. You are leading staff who are putting their lives at risk in fighting this pandemic.** This disaster is unique in that it is unfolding in our own lives while we are also trying to care for others. Our Disaster Response Mental Health team is rapidly working to support leadership at all levels so you can, in turn, support your staff and advocate for their needs. Below are 7 Tough Facts, **adapted from the Battlemind concepts**, to assist you, as a leader, **in developing the resilience of your staff** and bolstering their strength to fight this pandemic.

THIS IS DIFFICULT. STAFF DON'T CARE WHAT YOU KNOW, UNTIL THEY KNOW YOU CARE.

We know this: The number of those falling ill and/or dying from COVID-19, across the globe, is staggering. Front-line health care workers are **sacrificing their own health** and, in some cases, their lives in this fight.

Leaders can: Ensure that your staff are not taking unnecessary risks, conduct regular **check-ins with your team**, and **acknowledge with respect** that you care equally about those who are working and those who are out sick.

THIS ENVIRONMENT IS DEMANDING. RECOGNIZE THAT YOUR STAFF HAVE LIMITS.

We know this: The pace and environment will **take a physical and mental toll on front-line staff**.

Leaders can: Encourage your staff to get **adequate sleep, stay hydrated**, and **utilize wellness resources** available/provided. **Model self-care behaviors** and **incorporate wellness activities** into your check-ins/staff meetings (healthy snacks, short meditations/breathing exercises, encouraging staff to take walking breaks, etc.). **Recognize that your staff have their limits** and insist that self-care is maintained during this time.

FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY ARE NOT SIGNS OF WEAKNESS. EVERYONE EXPERIENCES FEAR.

We know this: **Stress response reactions** to disasters may include anxiety, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, anger, irritability, and avoidance of painful feelings and experiences.

Leaders can: Communicate to your staff that you have **trust** and **confidence in their ability to succeed** - they have successfully **managed difficult situations before**. Try to provide your staff with sufficient **time to reset**, and encourage them to **talk about their fears with trusted colleagues** - this is key. Provide **additional trainings**.

IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO ADMIT NEEDING MORE SUPPORT. THIS WILL IMPACT EVERYONE ON YOUR TEAM.

We know this: **Trauma-related responses** are common after large-scale disasters. Sometimes, this can lead to unhealthy coping strategies (avoidance strategies like increased substance use, poor dietary habits, aggression).

Leaders can: Establish a climate where you can **acknowledge that your staff are under stress** and **encourage your staff to seek additional support**, if needed. **Circulate mental health resources**, provided by the SFVAHCS Disaster Response Mental Health team. **EAP services are available, 24/7: 800-222-0364.**

FRONT-LINE RESPONSE PLACES A TREMENDOUS STRAIN ON FAMILIES.

We know this: Stress and anxiety related to fighting on the front lines, plus challenges faced at home (ill/vulnerable family members, school closures, unemployment, etc.), places **tremendous strain on families**.

Leaders can: **Acknowledge that your staff are operating in abnormal circumstances**. Encourage your staff to attend to family needs. Find a way to **recognize special occasions/milestones** of your staff and their families, which are being disrupted (graduations, weddings, birthdays, etc.). Families are **grieving losses** of all kinds.

TEAM COHESION AND STABILITY MAY BE DISRUPTED. STAFF FUNCTION BEST WITH THOSE THEY KNOW.

We know this: Staff cohesion **will be disrupted** by illness, competing home/work demands, emergency leave, changes in job functions to support gaps, etc. **Breakdowns in communication are common** during a crisis.

Leaders can: **Maintain the integrity of your team** to the best of your ability. **Try to rotate/shift pairs or small groups** of your staff, rather than moving individual staff members. Immediately **welcome new team members**. Help **reintegrate returning staff** who have been out/quarantined, and address any concerns or anxieties they have. **Keep your staff informed**, ensure that **policies and procedures are clear**, and share news of successes.

GOOD LEADERSHIP IS IMPERATIVE. STAFF NEED TO COME HOME WITH A STORY THEY CAN LIVE WITH.

We know this: **Good leadership is linked to higher morale**, better performance, and better cohesion. When facing crises, **staff often perceive failures in their leadership** - failures to think and act clearly under stress. Additionally, this **pandemic may pose moral and ethical challenges related to patient care**.

Leaders can: Encourage staff to ask questions and **limit your own defensiveness**. **Recognize your staff** for their sacrifices, offer **praise**, and **discuss the moral implications of difficult decisions** they may have to make.

*Battlemind concepts adapted from "10 Tough Facts About Combat and What Leaders Can Do to Mitigate Risk and Build Resilience."
Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Land Combat Team*



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP)



A voluntary, **work-based program** that provides **1-6 sessions of free, confidential assessment, short-term counseling, referrals, and follow-up services** to employees who are experiencing COVID-19 related anxiety. **For Immediate Confidential Assistance 24/7, call 800-222-0364. For more information about EAP: [Employee Assistance Program Resources](#). For all employees!**

VISN 21 WHOLE HEALTH: VA EMPLOYEES MOVEMENT MOMENTS



Get up and get your blood flowing! Movement Moments: **20-25 minutes of movements** from Chair Yoga, Stretches, Yoga, Pilates, etc., **Mondays, 4:15 p.m.**; April 6, 13, 20, 27; **Wednesdays, 7:30 a.m.**; April 8, 15, 22, 29. **VANTS:** 800-767-1750; Code: 22983# (Audio) and [Video](#). **For all employees!**

VISN 21 WHOLE HEALTH: VA EMPLOYEES PHONE-BASED MINDFULNESS



Mindfulness Meditation is a mind-body technique that helps you face the challenges and stressors of everyday life. **15-minute sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:15 – 12:30 p.m.**; April: 7, 9, 14, 16, 21, 23, 28, 30. **SKYPE Line:** 844-364-7554 or 844-964-7556; Code: 37963628. **For all employees!**

1-MINUTE MEDITATION



One-minute meditation, led by SFVAHCS's Chaplain Carolyn Talmadge, to calm the mind and relax the body. Available anytime. **For all employees!**

MINDFULNESS YOGA



60-minute Yoga program led by Carl Thomas Schuler, M.S. Peer Support Specialist / Yoga Teacher / Army Combat Veteran. **Wednesdays and Thursdays, 4:30 – 5:30 p.m.**, via VA Video Connect (VVC). **Contact Carl Schuler:** 415-696-1361, carl.schuler@va.gov. **For all employees!**

MIND-BODY SKILLS GROUPS



Mind-Body Skills Groups provide a safe and supportive environment for you to learn and practice a variety of skills that will help you **cope with stress, illness, and other challenges in your life, like what you may be experiencing with the COVID-19 pandemic**. Mind-Body Skills Groups will meet weekly for 90 minutes on **Mondays, 4:00 – 5:30 p.m. starting April 13 or Wednesdays, 4:00 – 5:30 p.m., starting April 29**. Zoom invite upon confirmation. **Contact Jenny Tighe:** Jennifer.Tighe@va.gov. **For all employees!**

INFORMATION ON COPING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY



Federal Occupational Health's Employee Assistance Program offers 1-hour **webinars** on **how to handle current stressors** in a series entitled, "Coping with Stress and Anxiety." **Available 24/7. For all employees!**

STRESS MANAGEMENT INDIVIDUAL CHECK-INS



Denise Davis, MD, FACH is offering **individual mentoring meetings** for all **EdPact System Trainees**, including Nurse Practitioner / Internal Medicine / Pharmacy / Mental Health / Dietician / Social Work Trainees. **Sundays, April 5 – April 26, 30-minute sessions from 1:00 – 4:30 p.m.** Zoom calendar invite upon confirmation. **Contact Denise Davis:** denise.davis@ucsf.edu.

MEDICAL SERVICE TRAINEE GROUP SUPPORT



Denise Davis, MD, FACH is inviting trainees to **group support sessions** via **Zoom** for all **EdPact System Trainees**, including Nurse Practitioner / Internal Medicine / Pharmacy / Mental Health / Dietician / Social Work Trainees. **Mondays, April 6, 13, 20, from 5:00 – 6:00 p.m.**

CHILDCARE RESOURCES FOR ESSENTIAL HEALTH CARE WORKERS



The **SF Emergency Child & Youth Care Program** is available to some SF health care workers (SFVAMC: **Code 954322**). Additionally, the Lands End School, located on-site at the San Francisco VA Medical Center, has a limited number of **temporary preschool spots** available for children of essential health care workers. Email Joanna Prado, director of the Lands End School, at joanna@thelandsendschool.com.



COVID-19: WELLNESS RESOURCES IN THE COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY-BASED 1:1 MENTAL HEALTH/EMOTIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES



[MH Association of SF Peer-Run Warm Line](#): 24/7 non-emergency emotional support by chat & 855-845-7415
[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): 24/7 confidential support for people in distress & loved ones, 800-273-8255
[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#): 24/7 confidential support in 200+ languages by chat & 800-799-SAFE
The [COVID19 Pro Bono Counseling Project](#) lists ~400 therapists who are offering pro bono brief therapy for distress/trauma related to COVID-19 to Bay Area health care workers. Use the website to book an appointment.

SELF-GUIDED STRESS MANAGEMENT APPS/WEBINARS



[Calm](#), a meditation app, has curated [these free resources](#) for support during COVID-19. [Happify](#) has some free options, and [Sanvello](#) is offering free premium access. [Headspace](#) is offering some meditations for free, as well as free Headspace Plus for health care professionals. [Insight Timer](#) is a free meditation app, and [Healthy Minds Program](#) is now freely available. [Inner Resources for Stress](#) is being offered as a free, on-demand webinar.

SUBSTANCE USE SUPPORT



[In the Rooms: A Global Recovery Community](#) offers 130 weekly online meetings for people in recovery, including 12 Step and non-12 Step options. [AA](#) (415-674-1821) and [NA](#) (415-621-8600) are offering virtual meetings. [LifeRing](#), [SMART Recovery](#), and [Recovery Dharma](#), and other groups are holding online meetings. [SAMHSA's National Helpline](#) (800-662-4357) offers 24/7 free, confidential referrals/info in English & Spanish.

VIRTUAL EXERCISE OPTIONS



[CorePower](#) is providing free on-demand online yoga/cardio classes. [YMCA SF](#) is offering free live virtual classes by Zoom. [Planet Fitness](#) is posting free "work-in" classes on Facebook Live daily at 7pm ET. [Nike](#) is offering Nike Training Club Premium free until further notice. [Orangetheory Fitness](#) is posting daily 30-minute workout videos.

INFORMATION ON COVID-19 AND COPING



National Center for PTSD: [Resources for Managing Stress](#); includes specific resources for health care workers
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: [Taking Care of Your Mental Health in the Face of Uncertainty](#)
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health](#)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#)

FINANCIAL/PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE



School meals are available for children under 18 throughout [CA](#). The [SF-Marin Food Bank Food Locator](#) lists food pantries in your area. The SF Tenants Union has an [Eviction Moratorium Fact Sheet](#) including sample letters/emails to landlords. PG&E is offering flexible payment plans; call 1-800-743-5000. Check your insurance companies' websites about benefits they may be offering. For internet access info, City and County of San Francisco is providing information about [free Wi-Fi hotspots](#) and [providers offering free/low-cost Wi-Fi/internet](#).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES



The CDC has information about [talking to children](#) about COVID-19, including this [resource](#). Some activities for kids include: [Virtual Author Activities](#), [Storytime from Space](#), [National Geographic Kids](#), [Cosmic Kids Yoga](#), [PBS Kids](#). Some [education companies are offering free subscriptions](#). The Family Caregiver Alliance lists [COVID-19 Resources and Articles for Family Caregivers](#) including [Tips for Dementia Caregivers](#).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR VETERANS



The [Whole Health Resource Directory](#) (accessible via Chrome browser, not Internet Explorer) lists hundreds of VA and community wellness resources available at low or no cost to Veterans. The VA website now includes [Coronavirus FAQs: What Veterans Need to Know](#). For information regarding GI Bill benefits and COVID-19, visit the [VA Education and Training webpage](#) and the [Student Veterans of America COVID-19 and GI Bill FAQs](#).

Disclaimer: Reference to any specific products or services listed above, or the appearance of external hyperlinks, does not necessarily constitute endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the Department of Veterans Affairs or by the United States Government.