



HERNANDO COUNTY ESF-8 WORKING GROUP

To enhance health and medical preparedness and response in Hernando County

8/13/2020 ESF-8 Working Group

Managing Workplace Stress and Fatigue During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has touched all aspects of our lives, not only in a personal way, but as essential workers and Health Care Workers. We are finding ourselves working more hours, working longer hours or even working nights that we don't usually work. This leaves us with less time to sleep and less time to take care of ourselves, leading to stress, anxiety and work-place fatigue.

In an SEOC Mental Health Awareness Webinar, 6/28/2020, it was stressed that we need to remember to take care of ourselves because disasters take a long time for recovery. The speaker stated that stress is the body's natural response to threat and often has a positive effect on our bodies by releasing cortisone and adrenaline which can help save lives during emergencies. But constant stress, like the kind we are often under now, can cause us to be constantly tired and can impact our immune system. Mental Health experts during the webinar stated that people have different stress coping styles and gave 12 ways to reduce stress and anxiety:

1. Be present in the moment. Don't think about the past or the future.
2. Use breathing exercises to be present in the moment. Simple breathing can reduce stress, cortisol levels and inflammation. Practice meditation and deep breathing.
3. Exercise and keep healthy and active. Exercise reduces stress hormones, produces endorphins and boosts self-esteem. Muscles release endorphins, the body's natural pain killer, and make us feel good.
4. Relaxation – actively relax, don't just collapse on the couch! Practice progressive muscle relaxation (tense different muscles and then intentionally relax them), sit with nature or listen to music.
5. Unload information overload: Get accurate information and behave appropriately. Get your information from a trusted source and be mindful of the information you are receiving. A good practice is to pay attention to how your body feels after watching a video, pause or take a break and let your body absorb what it is receiving.
6. Noticing behaviors. List things you do that are not helpful like overeating, not getting enough sleep or overconsuming media. Then list the things that will make you feel stronger and less overwhelmed like listening to music, breathing or going for a walk.
7. Become aware of our thoughts. What thoughts are causing stress? Identify how these affect your emotions and actions.
8. Express feelings and emotions. Find someone to talk to who will listen. Journal to let emotions out. Set boundaries with others as needed.
9. Parents take care. Like being in a plane and the oxygen mask drops, put yours on first and then put on your child's. Parents, like responders, need to take care of themselves so they are equipped to take care of others.

10. Rituals of the Everyday. How can we build structures again? This can bring back a sense of normalcy and continuity that may have been lost during COVID-19.
11. Social Contact is something we need. It releases positive chemicals in our body. Use digital tools, text, or others. Contact someone you have spoken to in a while.
12. Imagination and Creativity. You don't have to be an artist. Just put your hand on a piece of paper and trace.

The CDC has also released steps for Health Care Workers and Employers to take to reduce workplace fatigue so everyone can work safely. The CDC states under regular circumstances adults need 7-9 hours of sleep a night as well as opportunities to rest while awake. Without the needed rest, fatigue sets in and increases the risk for injury and deteriorating health like infections, illnesses, and mental health disorders.

While there is no one solution fits all, following are some general strategies the CDC recommends workers and employers use to manage workplace fatigue and work safely:

1. Recognize these are stressful and unusual times and you may need more sleep or time to recover.
 - Keep a dark, cool, quiet room to sleep in
 - Set a time to relax before going to bed
 - “Bank your sleep” – sleep several hours longer than you normally do when you have a long shift or shifts
 - After working the longer shifts, take several days of extended sleep to begin to feel recovered.
 - Avoid bright light or sunlight 90 minutes before going to sleep. If you work a nightshift, where sunglasses home and use black-out shades when sleeping
 - Take naps at every opportunity. A 90-minute nap before a shift can help prevent you from feeling tired at work.
 - Eat health foods and stay physically active
 - Avoid foods and drinks that make falling asleep more difficult.
2. Know what to do if you feel too tired to work safely.
 - Use the buddy system while at work to ensure everyone is coping with work hours and demands
 - Watch yourself and your co-workers for signs of fatigue (yawning, difficulty keeping eyes open and concentrating) When you see something, say something so you can prevent workplace injuries and errors.
 - Fully understand your employer’s policies and procedures for helping employees manage fatigue.
 - Report any fatigue-related events or close-calls
 - Don’t work if your fatigue threatens the safety of yourself or others.
3. Employers should recognize these are stressful times and unusual circumstances and fatigue may be increased.
4. A culture of safety should be created between management and staff with clear coordination and communication between both factions.
5. There should be procedures in place that doesn’t punish workers for reporting that they or their co-workers are too fatigued to work safely.
6. Develop processes to relieve workers from their duties when they are too fatigued to work. This may include rotating staff when jobs are safety-critical tasks or repetitive and strenuous. Or,

schedule mentally demanding workloads and monotonous work in shorter shifts or during the day shift.

7. Provide information on the consequences of sleep deprivation and resources to assist and manage workplace fatigue.
8. Workers need time to organize off-duty obligations as well as get enough rest and recovery. Schedule at least 11 hours in between shifts and one full day of rest every seven days.
9. If rotating shift work is needed, use forward rotations (day to evening, evening to night) and provide sufficient notice of scheduling changes
10. Provide alternative transportation to and from work and mandatory paid rest time prior to driving commutes after work when possible. Consider providing nearby offsite housing for staff working extended shifts and at high risk for COVID-19.

Finally, it is important to recognize that we all cope with stress differently and we need to make allowances and support each other during these unusual circumstances.

For more information:

Website: <https://www.israaid.org/stressrelief/>

Website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/managing-workplace-fatigue.html>