

IAFC WEBINARS



COVID-19 Weekly Updates

Monday, April 30, 2020, 1 PM ET

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INTRODUCTION OF PANELISTS

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How many hours of training have you had?

- Every emergency services agency works hard to identify circumstances that could put their team at risk and provides the tools and trainings individuals need to reduce, if not eliminate, that risk.
- We know that training and practice are essential to staying safe on the job



The unrecognized risk

- For a very long time, little to nothing was known about the emotional cost of being a first responder
- Even when the risk started to be recognized, it wasn't talked about – and we didn't know what, if anything, could be done about it anyway



The problem is real

- In 2017, at least 103 firefighters and 140 police officers took their own lives, compared to the 93 firefighters and 129 police officers who died in the line of duty, the Ruderman Family Foundation reports.
- The mental health study cited PTSD and depression stemming from exposure to trauma as factors that contributed to the higher-than-usual suicide rates.



- Additionally, the recorded rates of suicide among first responders is likely artificially low—the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance estimates that approximately 40% of firefighter suicides are reported. This could make the actual number of suicides in 2017 closer to 257—more than twice the number of firefighters who died in the line of duty.



What is going on?

- Part of the answer is physiological
- Part of it is emotional and behavioral
- A huge part of it is cultural



Our bodies are designed to handle stress...sort of



Fight, flight or freeze

- Alarm
- Resistance
- Exhaustion
- Reset



Unfortunately, life is more like this



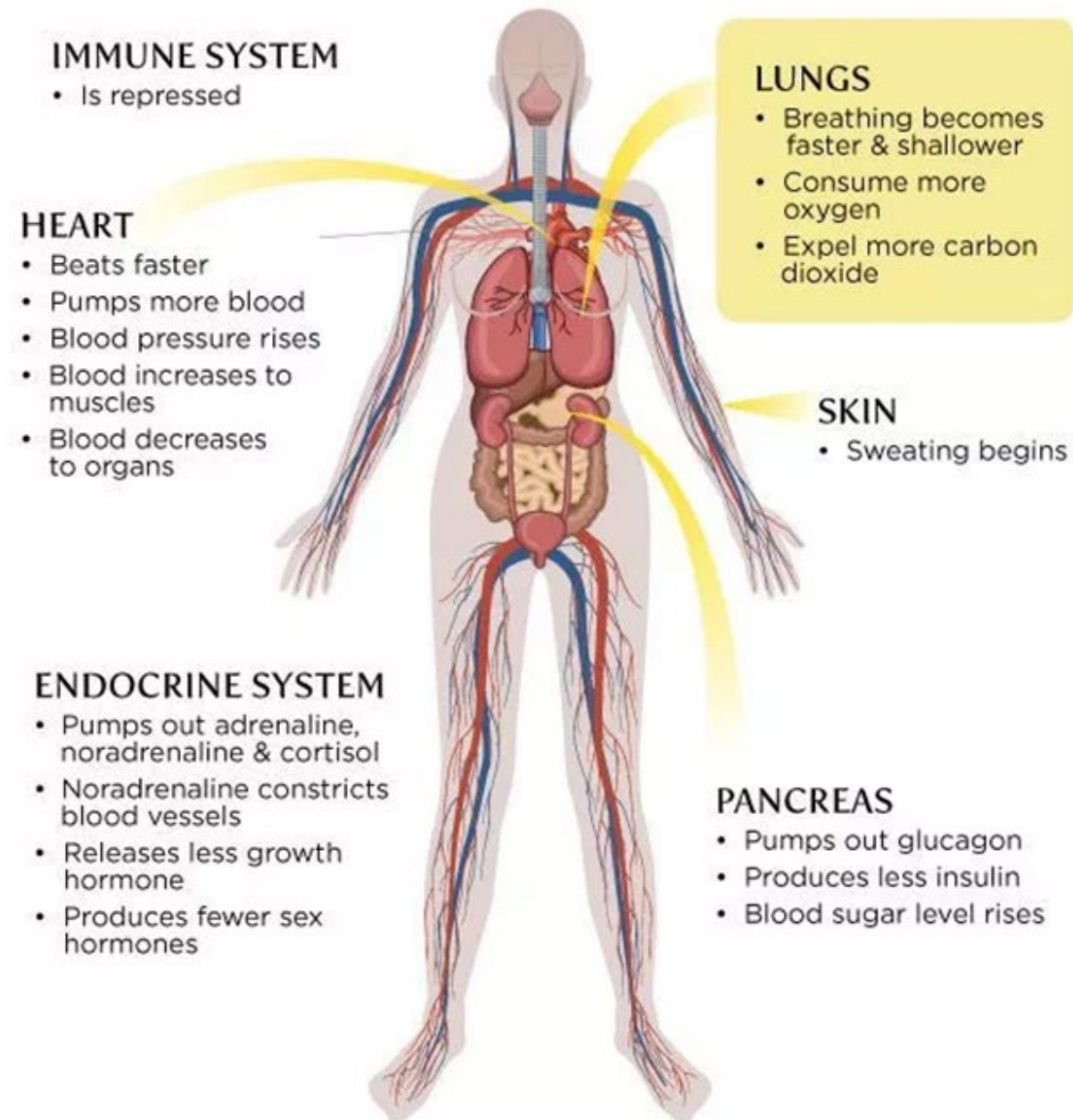
Alarm

- As you begin to experience a stressful event or *perceive* something to be stressful, physical changes occur in your body
- This disrupts your normal balance and your body begins to respond as effectively as possible



Physiology

Fight-or-Flight Response



There is also a cognitive response

- How an experience is evaluated, or how you think about it, is critically important
- “This is difficult but I’ll be ok” produces a different experience than “This is horrible, I can’t handle this”



Resistance

- During this stage, your body tries to cope or adapt to the stressors by trying to re-establish homeostasis, and beginning to repair any physiological damage the stress response has caused



Exhaustion

- During this stage, the stressor is not being managed effectively and the body and mind are not able to repair the damage. This results in:
 - Chronic fatigue
 - Chronic headaches/muscle and joints aches
 - Autoimmune disorders
 - Decreased immune system functioning
 - Gastro-intestinal disease/distress



Stress is not all bad

- Experiencing stress is a normal, healthy part of life
- Healthy stress + healthy coping = healthy person
- Healthy stress is usually situation specific, time-limited, and is helped by positive coping strategies



Unhealthy Stress

- Can come from a number of sources – choices, circumstances, attitude
- Either usual coping is not being used, is not as effective, or is becoming harmful
- Failure to recognize and address this can result in things getting progressively worse over time
- If not addressed, it can become health threatening or even life threatening



Job satisfaction plays a role

- Compassion satisfaction is about the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well
- For example, you may feel positively about your ability to help people, about your colleagues, your ability to contribute to your work place and to your community
- There's a general feeling that the positive aspects of your job outweigh the negative.



Compassion Fatigue

- It's a risk of working in a helping profession
- It comes in two “flavors”
 - Burnout
 - Secondary traumatic stress



Burnout

- Burnout is associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or not doing your job effectively
- Usually has a gradual onset
- Can reflect the feeling that your efforts make no difference, or can be associated with a very high workload or non-supportive work environment



Secondary traumatic stress

- Negative feelings driven by fear and work-related trauma
- Primary trauma is when your work puts you directly in the path of danger
- Secondary trauma occurs when you repeatedly hear others' traumatic stories or are frequently in contact with traumatized individuals



Primary vs. Secondary

- Reactions to primary trauma are typically intense but short-lived; they are a normal reaction and pass with time, leaving only unpleasant memories OR
- They can stick with you, don't fade over time and run the risk of becoming PTSD



- We tend to recognize primary trauma, whether we acknowledge the impact and seek assistance or not
- Secondary trauma often goes unrecognized and yet the impact can be far more damaging (think a river wearing away a rock versus a flood knocking some small rocks loose)



Common problems in first responders

- Social withdrawal
- Damaged relationships
- Loss of empathy
- Increase use of alcohol or other negative coping
- Genuine cynicism
- Depression



Social withdrawal

- Keeping to yourself
- Not wanting to talk about work
- No/limited contact with friends
- Only socializing with coworkers
- Being cranky at home
- Negative view of self/world/people
- Cutting out hobbies



Negative coping

- Yelling/screaming/hitting
- Eating more/less
- Sleep too much or not enough
- Worry/anxiety
- Avoiding responsibilities
- Blaming others
- Overworking
- Isolating
- Inactivity

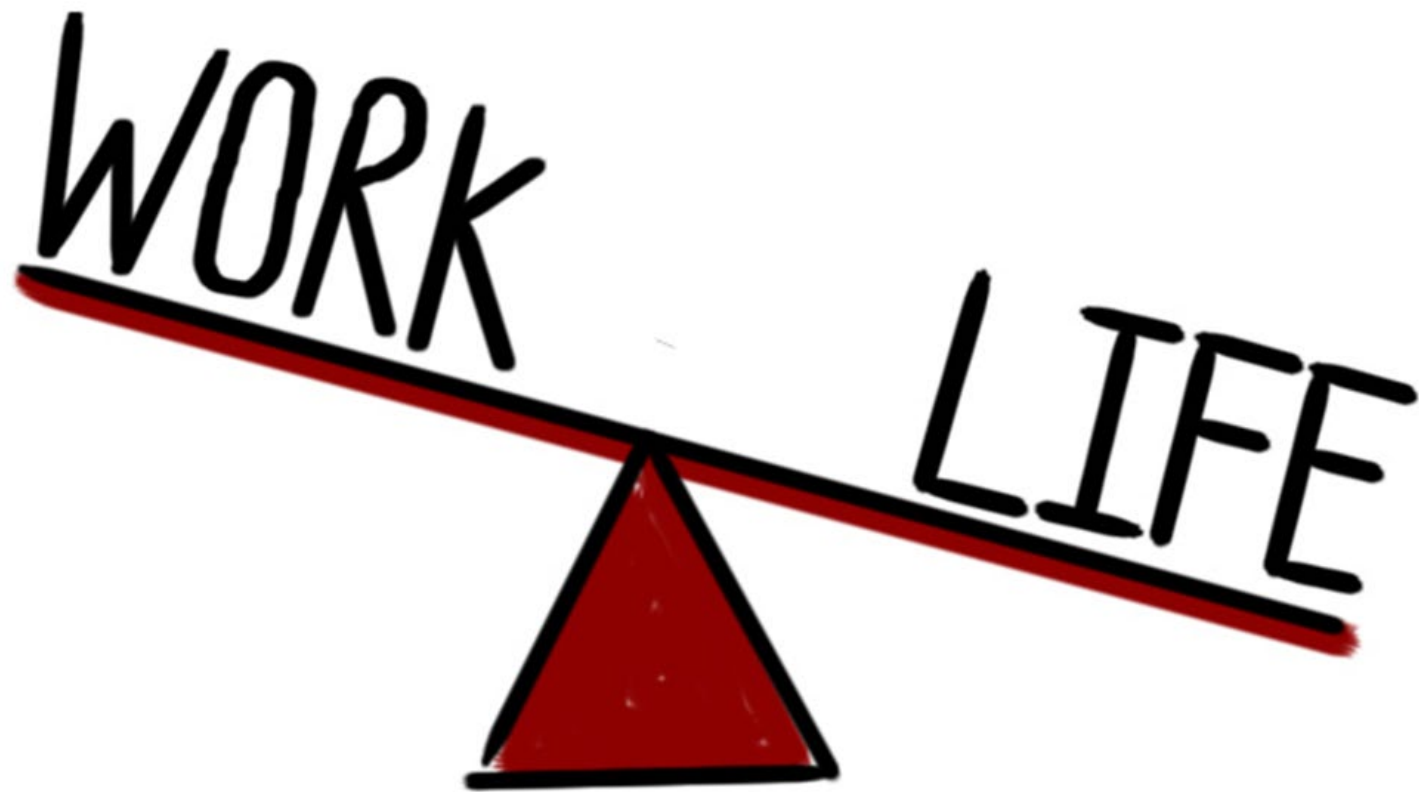


Staying healthy

- Requires BALANCE
- Does not happen automatically
- Requires consistent prevention strategies that addresses both individual and organizational issues
- Requires on and off the job attention to your thoughts, feelings and actions



Without balance



- More susceptible to vicarious trauma
- More likely to experience compassion fatigue
- Higher likelihood of burnout



Start with a self assessment

- Consider your own trauma history – what are your triggers? Can you reduce exposure to them?
- Evaluate your stress load outside of work
- Do you do things that refresh you?
- Do you have realistic expectations of yourself and others?
- What tasks use most of your energy?



Four parts of you

- Biological
- Psychological
- Social
- Spiritual



Now, you need a plan

- Taking care of each of aspect of you doesn't happen automatically, it takes planning and practice
- Consider each 'domain' and what you are currently doing that's working for which domain
- Identify your negative coping skills – what are you willing to change?



Health behaviors – you know what they are

- Sleep – most people are sleep deprived. How do you do better given your work schedule?
- Exercise – including cardio and strength training
- Diet – eat healthier, fresher
- Limit caffeine. Yes, I'm serious.
- Stay hydrated, not with Mountain Dew. See above



Psychological and Social Health

- Spend time with friends
- Spend time with family
- Spend time alone
- Spend time in nature
- Engage in hobbies you enjoy
- Laugh
- Play



Spirituality

- This means different things for different people
- It can involve engaging in some form of organized religion or worship practices
- It can also involve meditative practices, time in nature, time performing non work-related service to others



So, what's the problem?

- If we all know these things are good for us, why aren't we all doing them regularly?
- Set your priorities
- Enlist support
- Do what you enjoy



Let others help you

- Help-seeking can take many forms and it is a sign of wisdom, not weakness
- Talking informally with friends, family, supportive others
- Letting go of the need to control the world when you're not working
- Finding balance between healthy situational awareness and hypervigilance



Use the Serenity Prayer

- Accept the things you can't change
- Change the things you can
- Learn to tell the difference



And finally...

- Not everyone is cut out to do the job you do
- It's critically important for you, your loved ones and your community that you keep yourself well enough to continue to do the good work that you do.
- **THANK YOU!!**



Questions & Answers



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