



## First Responder Stress

The prevalence of Stress in our society has increased in fact an APA report (<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/sia-pandemic-report.pdf>) found the majority of people surveyed were suffering with elevated levels of stress. If a sample of the normal population is more stressed then it is safe to say that first responders are facing more stress than the average person and are also less likely to seek mental health resources.

It is important for us to realize that Low level stress can help someone be resilient, solve problems, tackle everyday challenges, motivate us and help us adjust to change. Some times the more we have to do the more we get done. It can also be difficult to realize when enough is enough.

Intense stress that is unresolved and sustained takes a toll and is harmful. This scenario is present for first responders nationwide. It is this cumulative stress that goes unchecked that is taking the lives of first responders and damaging families and ending careers. The warning signs are increased family and coworker/supervisor conflicts, increased physical injuries, withdrawal from social events, increased use of substances, increased anxiety and depression, and decreased self-worth and self-esteem.

First responders rely on the brain's **Fight or Flight response** withing the body to deal with real or perceived threats. If we sense danger our brain triggers adrenal glands to release hormones to activate the bodies response. Unfortunately, this response gets turned on so often for first responders that you eventually just stay in this elevated response mode all the time. This cortisol dump that occurs increases heart rate and blood pressure and also affects mood, motivation and fear. Increased cortisol levels can negatively impact our immune systems and digestive systems and increase glucose levels. Many health problems can occur due to this ongoing stress reaction.

- Brain problems
- Heart problems
- Headaches
- Mood issues
- Memory or concentration problems
- Weight gain
- Digestive issues
- Troubles sleeping

## **5 ways First responders can Reduce Stress Hormones**

### **Deep Breathing**

Whenever you feel worried, frustrated, angry, or tense, do a deep breathing exercise.

Focusing on your breathing for a few minutes is one of the simplest and quickest ways to settle your anxious or stressful thoughts. Do this on the way to a call and after a call. Start your day and end your day with deep breathing. If you start to use this stress reduction method you will start to use it without knowing when you need it most.

Breathe with your diaphragm rather than your chest (when you breath in your belly expands and when you breath out your belly contracts). Try this exercise 2 ways

1. 4-4-4 breathing in for count of 4 hold for count of 4 and out for count of 4. Repeat this 5 times.
2. Inhale 3 to 4 seconds then Exhale 6 to 8 seconds Repeat this pattern 10 times.

### **Animal Companionship**

I often hear from first responders, “ I don’t want to be around other people”OR “I HATE PEOPLE”. When you feel this way, spend time around animals. Whether it is a pet or going to a farm, animals can help us relax our muscles, slow our breathing, and lower our heart rate. It allows a feeling of connection that we all need and can heal us from the inside out. Animal contact can combat loneliness and isolation, increase exercise and allows us to provide care for something which can increase our oxytocin levels (our feel good hormone).

### **Meditation**

Scientific evidence shows that meditation can help calm anxiousness and stress and enhance brain function. Find an app to use, find a video to watch, take a class but practice meditation and schedule it every day. Find a form of meditation that works for you. This is an activity that brings focus or emptiness to your mind which allows for time away from stress and worry. This is an exercise for the brain. A way to control your mind and reactions.

### **Social Connections**

Being around the right people is important for resilience and mental health. Choose to be around people who make you less frustrated, less angry and less depressed. The people you

are around have a dramatic effect on you. As first responders it's not uncommon to be with each other on days off. This can be beneficial if you all choose to leave the work stress, complaining and negatives behind. Commiserating won't make it better it just drags it on and takes a toll. Which can lead to the isolation because you don't want to be around anyone. Plan activities that bring joy, that are upbeat and make you feel good about yourself and others this will actually counter the negative effects of stress.

### **Nutritional Supplements**

- Magnesium is a calming mineral. It promotes a balanced and mentally focused demeanor and can assist with sleep.
- Taurine supports adrenal function which assists with the ability to cope with stress.
- Increase your green tea or take l-theanine to reduce tension
- GABA helps to cope with restlessness, irritability, and anxiety.
- Pre and probiotics
- Vitamin D3
- Increase intake of omega-3 fatty acids
- multiple vitamin, vitamin c, and zinc for immune support.
- herbs like: Panax ginseng, Rhodiola, ashwagandha can reduce stress.

Things you can CHOOSE to do:

- Cut out or cut down the toxins like smoking, vaping, chewing and alcohol consumption.
- Reduce intake of sugar, artificial sweetener and caffeine.
- Do 30 minutes of aerobic exercise a day
- Practice gratitude, do something for someone else and be appreciative of what others do for you.
- Laugh- watch something funny, turn off the News.

***It is not realistic to do all of these recommendations but what can you incorporate today to make a difference? Then add something new each day or each week. Practice and create a habit then it will become a healthy new norm.***