

How to PREP for a Mental Marathon

11 ways to fortify your resilience during a longterm global pandemic.

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

I spent nearly a month in the Gulf Coast following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, serving as one of the clinical advisors for the United States Coast Guard's peer-support team response. Although this multi-month disaster was very different from what is happening today with the COVID-19 pandemic, I think the stresses first responders experience are somewhat similar.

Like Coast Guardsmen, first responders know how to take care of themselves. Most of you have been trained to manage stress, and your departments have long been preaching and teaching the virtues of healthful eating, exercise, and ongoing training and education. You know how to endure troubling events by utilizing grounding techniques, such as deep breathing, staying active, taking breaks as needed, limiting caffeine and not using alcohol or drugs to cope. You know how to get back on your feet after especially traumatic incidents by talking to others and using internal or external stress-management resources, such as peer-support teams or culturally competent clinicians. However, events that last an unusually long time, impact a large area and leave thousands dead feel very different, and that difference is compounded when these situations trigger fears of loss—loss of control, income, civil liberties, spiritual connection or trust in your government.

An event as broad and deep as the COVID-19 pandemic will have profound implications for public safety responders, stretching their usual resilience and mettle to the limits. Like Hurricane Katrina, the COVID-19 pandemic will challenge our organizations and our communities for months or longer. Emergency response personnel, in particular, will confront the stressors of this event while on the job, with no escape from its impact at home. Your usual coping skills could fall short, and your well-honed resilience might fail you. How can you steel yourself for a seemingly unending incident that puts the entire population at risk?

When working with the Coast Guard's peer-response team, it became evident we had to develop new ways to foster resiliency/recovery. Responders grew tired of hearing the usual rhetoric about self-care, but we still worried about them and wanted to help them maintain some sense of joy for living. Below are *Tim's Additional Rules for Survival and Self-Preservation amid Chaos and Calamity*.

1. Understand That Things Change

As much as we like predictability and dislike change, first responders get a paycheck because things change! Most people have no idea when they wake up on any given day that they will have to call 911 (frequent flyers excluded). Their world is about to turn upside down, they just don't know it yet. (I learned a third of the way into my career that not even my family and I were immune to this reality.) It's not a matter of if but when you or a loved one will be affected by, or know someone affected by coronavirus, and understanding this reality will help you process your emotions when that time comes.

2. Allow Yourself to be Human

Many emergency responders can't accept or don't allow normal human responses to tragedy. We are masters of shoving things down and pretending events don't bother us. (As Dr. Phil would say, "How's that been working out for you?") We are not machines, we are human, and humans experience emotional responses to horrific events. I am not suggesting you should stop to emote at an emergency scene. However, if you are involved in a shocking, stressful or devastating event, allow yourself time to feel sad, angry or frightened.

3. Learn the "Gift of Grief" (Before You Experience It)

Grief sucks, but it fosters personal growth. Most people who have been through the grieving process will say things are very different on the other side of that painful journey. Things that once seemed important might not be anymore.

My own grief experience compelled me to see the world with new eyes. How often do you notice the breeze rustling the leaves? The colors of the fir needles? Wildflowers popping through the cracks in the sidewalk? Did you notice the sky this morning? The blues or grays, the soft, rolling clouds? When you went outside, did you feel the sun on your face or cool raindrops hitting the back of your neck? Did you take a deep breath of fresh air (made fresher now that we are isolating and not driving as much)? Did you hear the dog barking or children laughing? Maybe you felt a sense of peace. Before my experience with loss, I saw and felt none of these things because I was too busy thinking about work or other life challenges. I appreciate the gifts that grief gave me.

As first responders who witness life's darkest moments, we are uniquely positioned to understand and experience the gifts of grief before something bad happens in our lives. The challenge is to learn these lessons now—especially as we are spending more time at home. Be patient, appreciate the current positives in your life and enjoy this time with family. All of this can change in an instant. I don't know who said the following about what grief teaches us, but I appreciate the sentiments. "Grief teaches us the value of living in the

present, the joy of spontaneity, the value of time, the benefits of change, the value of patience, the pleasure of laughter, the need to belong, the value of sharing and the worth of relationships.”

4. Do Things You Enjoy

It's OK to do something for you, whatever that may be. It's not selfish to practice self-care as long as you don't use it as an excuse to push away family and friends. What can we do during social isolation? Read a good book, take a bath or have a cup of coffee/tea on your patio before others get up. Garden, tinker in your shop, draw, take an online class, listen to music, listen to nature, knit, journal, or enjoy any hobby or activity that helps you unwind or enriches your soul. Just Do it!

“ How far you go in life depends on you being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving & tolerant of the weak & the strong. Because someday in life, you will have been all of these. ”

—George Washington Carver

5. Focus on the Positive

You get to decide how each day starts and ends. We discussed brain plasticity in a previous article ([click here to read](#)); when we change the way we look at things, the things we look at will change. Every day can be a good day if you allow it. It's your choice. It can be challenging to look on the bright side, but there are always things to appreciate.

6. Stay Connected

We are social by nature; the human brain is wired to connect with other human beings, to belong and form relationships. Sadly, our personal default during times of stress might be to retreat and isolate. Resist! Stay connected with friends and loves ones, even if you are physically isolating due to shelter-in-place or stay-home orders. Call family members or connect via social media. If you live with others, work on puzzles together. Ask your kids what they want to do with you while you're at home, even if you don't feel like engaging. Your friends and family need you, and you need them. Fake it til you make it!

7. Laugh

Laughter releases endorphins and catecholamines, which have been shown to reduce pain and induce feelings of happiness. If you have a computer, tablet or modern cell phone, then you have access to movies, television shows, comedy specials, social media and YouTube (which offers an endless selection of silly animal and stupid human videos). Billy Graham once said: “A keen sense of humor helps us to overlook the unbecoming, understand the unconventional,

tolerate the unpleasant, overcome the unexpected, and outlast the unbearable." A fitting perspective given the current situation.

8. Talk (Cough Up the Apple)

When things aren't going well or you are feeling profound stress, you can either suppress your feelings (stuff them) or talk about them. I learned the apple analogy early in my career, and it's a good way to describe how talking can help us cope with our emotions.

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Witnessing or experiencing a deeply traumatic event is like trying to swallowing a whole apple. The apple gets stuck in our throat, and it feels very uncomfortable. If we are otherwise healthy and balanced and continue to take care of ourselves, our body will slowly process the apple, and over time, it will eventually drop into our stomach. This can take a few weeks, however, and while we are waiting to digest the apple, anything that reminds us of the stressful incident will also remind us of the uncomfortable feeling in our throat.

On the other hand, talking about the trauma is akin to coughing up the apple. As we discuss how the event affected us, we bite off pieces of the apple. By the time we finish sharing our story and feelings, all the smaller pieces of apple have fallen into our stomach, where they digest immediately. This is not psychotherapy; it's simply helping ourselves to speed up the time it takes to work through something traumatic.

I once worked with a fire department that made coughing up the apple a part of their routine. This department had been through a couple horrendous fire seasons that claimed many lives and greatly impacted the community.

While eating dinner at their firehouses, each shift did something they called High/Low. After their meal, before they cleared the dishes, they went around the table, and each person shared their high and low points of the day. Highs included taking delivery of a new piece of equipment, getting new department T-shirts, or having the chief stop by for a cup of coffee. Lows included responding to a child who had been hit by a car, missing one's children, and hearing a co-worker was sick. Whether they knew it or not, this department had developed a ritualized way for all members to leave stuff at the table. It's a great technique.

9. Respect/Be Kind to Others

Many scientific studies have shown that acts of kindness positively affect the immune system of both the recipient of the good deed and the doer as well. Treat others the way you would want yourself or your loved ones to be treated. During this pandemic, everyone is scared, and chances are, before this pandemic is over, everyone is going to know someone who has died. A lot of people are also concerned about finances: How will they feed their kids, pay their mortgage or keep their business open. Each of us is wondering when things will ever feel normal again. It's important to give each other extra slack during times of uncertainty. When stress provokes the worst in you, dig deep and choose kindness. It's better for you, and it's better for the people around you.

10. Have Faith

George Woodberry once said, “A life without faith in something is too narrow a space to live.” Spirituality is a belief or connection to something bigger than ourselves—God, humanity, a benign universal presence, the love of family. Decide what fills you up spiritually, then tap into that source when you are feeling run down, depressed or isolated.

11. Live Like You Are Dying

Country music artist Tim McGraw sings a song about a guy who learns he doesn't have much longer to live. When Tim asks him what you do when you get that kind of news, the man replied, “I went skydiving, I went Rocky Mountain climbing, I rode 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu. And I loved deeper. And I spoke sweeter. And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying...

“...I was finally the husband that most of the time I wasn't. And I became a friend—a friend would like to have. I hope someday you get the chance to live like you were dying.”

Stay Safe, Stay Resilient

First responders are in the business of mitigating the unwelcome change that happens in people's lives, and we and our friends/family/loved ones are not immune to these changes. Wouldn't it be cool to go to bed each night with no regrets over how we treated people that day? That ain't a bad way to live! Take care of yourselves and each other. We are a resilient population, and we will get through this together. I will leave you with lyrics from the song “The Change” by Garth Brooks.

*One hand reaches out
And pulls a lost soul from harm
While a thousand more go unspoken for
And they say,
“What good have you done by saving just this one?”
It's like whispering a prayer in the fury of a storm
And I hear them saying,
“You'll never change things.”
And no matter what you do it's still the same thing
But it's not the world that I am changing
I do this so this world will know
That it will not change me*

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2020 Train-the-Trainer Schedule
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77 East Thomas Road
Phoenix, AZ 85012



Train the Trainer

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