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PHASE III

Dealing with the Loss of One of Your Own to the Coronavirus (COVID 19): Preparation and Response

Dealing with a public health emergency in general can create a variety of emotions for both you and your family. However, when the potential of losing a co-worker, friend or family member moves from a possibility to a reality that becomes a game-changer. The hope that you, your co-worker, or your family members won't contract the virus, or if you do you will survive, is now shattered by the reality of a loss to this invisible enemy. Even if you have dealt with line of duty deaths over your career, the COVID 19 loss can be more difficult. There is no bad actor that you can run down, catch and bring to justice. There is no one person or group of individuals you can track down and teach them a lesson. The invisible enemy is not fazed by your anger or your grief. There was no armor, physical or mental, that could protect you. This reality, if not checked, can lead to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness or foreboding for you and your family. Your reactions and feelings about the loss must be processed, but you still must carry on with your job and life. The loss to the COVID 19 becomes an event that is **TOO MUCH, TOO UGLY AND TOO DIFFERENT**. You will be struggling not only with your own feelings, but how do you tell your family and reassure them and their fears. If the pandemic emergency and losses continue for a long period of time, your stress responses can be more intense than you are accustomed to experiencing. The following is information that is intended to a) identify some of the specific reactions you or your family members may experience and b) identify specific coping techniques for each of the expected reactions. Some of the information presented in this phase has also been included in the previous phases due to their importance in coping.

- **Shock, Psychic Numbing, Grief and a Deep Sense of Loss**-The event that you theoretically knew would come someday, but you received comfort in embracing denial has now arrived. Dealing with the 'Known Dead' opens a whole series of emotions and thoughts that you have avoided. Your Desensitization coping mechanisms may falter as you are faced with the reality of **TOO MUCH, TOO UGLY AND TOO SIMILAR**. These thoughts, if not checked can expand into thinking about losing more of the Known.
 - **Intervention Options**
 - In order to navigate out of this phase you must process the event as you would any loss. Focus on the loss of your friend, not on *how* he/she died.
 - At this point in time a small bit of 'Denial' can be helpful. There are actions I can do to prevent the invisible enemy from taking me or my family.
 - Don't repress your emotions, but rather express your emotions.
 - Take advantage of available mental health resources.
 - Give yourself permission to heal and move on.



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- **Increased emotionality**-Increased anger, emotional outbursts, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, foreboding and/or general irritability with others are also common. These emotions, if not controlled, can lead to free floating anger or anxiety feelings of despair, or even more hopelessness and helplessness.
 - **Intervention Options**
 - Try to avoid alcohol-while alcohol may temporarily make you feel better and allow you to disengage, substance use can worsen anger responses and can add to problems at home and in your personal/professional relationships.
 - Stay in contact with your support system and your coworkers.
 - Allow your grief and other emotions to be released at appropriate times and in an appropriate manner.
 - After a loss of a known person your stress and trauma reactions tend to be more severe when you feel personally unsafe or helpless to assist your family. Stay connected with your family members and your support systems.
 - Understand that your role during this public health emergency may be different than anything you have ever done before, and this may cause additional stress. Acknowledge that this is normal for the New Normal.
 - Separation from family will likely exacerbate your worries. If possible, periodically check-in with at least one member of your family. Note that communication abilities may decrease or even be impossible, so if your family is unreachable, do not allow your mind to go to worst-case scenarios.

- **Shattering of both you and your family's assumptions of safety and wellbeing**- We all have assumptions about the world and our lives. These assumptions can be things like 'my kids are safe at school and nothing bad can happen there, 'movie theaters are safe places' or 'My family and I are safe from death due to the COVID 19. When these assumptions become shattered you must make a choice to engage in denial (it won't be that bad), psychologically deteriorate into feelings of helplessness or hopelessness. Avoid the tendency to slip down that 'Rabbit Hole' by focusing on a specific task, areas in which you have control and developing a 'New Normal'
 - **Intervention Options**
 - In order to survive you all must engage in a bit of 'Denial.' For example, with all of the school shootings you need to assume that the school has a good safety protocol otherwise you would never let your children leave home. In this case, focus on you and your family's 'Self Care' techniques.
 - You must develop the 'New Normal' thinking in which you assume that other losses can and will occur, but you will have safety plans for you and your family.



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- Develop, communicate and implement your personal and family ‘Self Care’ prevention and recovery plan.
 - Respond to this public health emergency as if you are a survivor not a victim. This means that you need to utilize all of your coping resources. Utilize whatever resources you have available to you including family, friends, spiritual advisors, or mental health professionals.
 - Make stress reduction a priority- Downtime is essential. Avoid burnout by regularly engaging in activities you find pleasurable and that allow you to recharge. You don’t question your phone battery’s need to recharge each day so why assume you don’t need to recharge as well? Once energy is depleted, action is required before it can be replenished-no one has an endless supply and energy doesn’t magically restore.
- **Work and family conflict**-This is the hardest issue you will face, which becomes even more difficult when your family learns of the loss of a known co-worker. How do you balance your career with your family’s escalating concerns and wishes? If you choose one over the other there will be resentment either by you or your family. At this point in time your family will need plans, not ‘bumper sticker’ statements such as ‘Don’t worry, I will be fine’. After a loss you significant other and your children will have their fears increase regarding your safety as well as their own safety.
 - **Intervention Options**
 - Consensus and Compromise are the best choices. Accommodations that are not reciprocal can and will lead to Resentment.
 - In talking with your children, be age appropriate but don’t overshare
 - Ask you children what they would need to feel less anxious and develop a realistic and reasonable plan to help them
 - Problem-solve ways to meet work demands while at the same time alleviating your family’s fears and anxieties.
 - Generate a timeline for problem solving. Then at the end of the timeline re-evaluate the direction and focus.
 - Take advantage of your Agency’s psychological services
 - Don’t minimize your or your family’s fears.
 - Re-evaluate how you are doing. This involves being honest with yourself and asking others about how they think you are doing

During this time, it is important to focus on preparation rather than panic. If you or any member of your family is struggling, remember that there are many resources available to you and your first responder family including Peer Support, Chaplain services, Employee Assistance Services and your local mental health providers.



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Additional Resources

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Family Emergency Plan Wallet Cards:

https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1440517182204-fd5e99bd2931f0f566d068ca844370ce/Family_Emergency_plan_wallet_2015.pdf

Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event- A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA12-4732/SMA12-4732.pdf>

Managing Intense Emotions During Disaster Response:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//NMH05-0210/NMH05-0210.pdf>

Returning to Work After Disaster Response:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA14-4870/SMA14-4870.pdf>

Helping Kids Cope: COVID 19

[Counseling Team International \(CTCI\)](#)