

## Helping the Helper: A Guide for Families

While first responders are on the front lines responding to emergencies and other traumatic events, their loved ones play important supporting roles. Whether you are a family member, friend, or any other loved one, the stresses a first responder brings home affects you as well.

Family members are a primary source of support for first responders. They are often the first to notice changes in mood and behavior, can encourage their loved ones to get help, can help them access resources, and are there for them long after an incident has happened.

It's important for families to understand what mental health is, how to identify the early signs and symptoms of those who are struggling with their mental health, and how to access resources to support their loved ones.

### THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Supporting the first responder in your family isn't easy. They work long shifts and odd hours, often bring the stress of their work back home, and are more likely to experience mental health issues. You probably see the first responder in your family daily. This means you have a key role to play in supporting the mental health of your loved one. This support includes:

- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of loved ones who may be struggling with them
- Mental health
- Having conversations with loved ones about these struggles
- Help your partner engage in practices that will keep them healthy
- Understanding what resources are available to you and your family



Communication can be challenging for first responders' families at the best of times. First responders often come home from work and "don't want to talk about it." This may be because of burnout and exhaustion, compartmentalization, confidentiality concerns, or not wanting to traumatize their family members. Unfortunately, this lack of communication can contribute to first responders' disconnection and isolation from their primary support people. While there is no exact formula for healthy communication, families should talk about and set their boundaries and expectations together — ideally, earlier rather than later.

### **Understanding mental health**

First responders regularly encounter stressful situations, which can affect the brain over time. This section describes those effects and how they help with understanding the mental health challenges of first responders.

### **Recognizing signs and symptoms**

Family members are in a good position to recognize the signs and symptoms of loved ones who may be struggling with their mental health, often recognizing any deterioration before the loved one does. If family recognizes that this may be occurring, they are able to act.

### **Having a conversation**

It's important for family to act if they think a loved one needs mental health support, whether it's because they recognize signs and symptoms or because the loved one seeks help from them directly. Families need to respond with empathy and understanding.

### **Taking care of yourself**

It isn't just first responders who feel the stress of the job — family feels that stress too. Family members need to take care of themselves if they are going to be able to support their loved one.

### **Available resources**

Family members should also know where to refer a loved one to for more resources and support. First responders usually have a range of resources available to support their mental health, including counselling. There are also several community supports available to the public that are useful.



## UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

In the past few years, there has been increased discussion around first responders and the mental health issues they face. There have been several media stories profiling first responders who say their mental health issues stem from the trauma and stress they experience on the job.

First responders are repeatedly exposed to distressing situations and occasionally violence, trauma, and death. They also encounter daily workplace stressors such as heavy workloads, rotating shifts, and, occasionally, discrimination and bullying. These factors can have an immediate detrimental impact on some individuals; for others, the negative effects build up over weeks, months, or even years.

Many first responders will experience symptoms of a mental health condition either temporarily or on a recurring or ongoing basis. These conditions include anxiety, depression, substance misuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While awareness about mental health issues in the workplace has increased over the years, there is still a lot of stigma associated with mental health challenges. Research commissioned by the BC First Responders Mental Health Committee found that many first responders are cautious in talking to the leadership in their organization about any mental health issues they have in their workplaces. This stigma can also make first responders reluctant to discuss these issues at home with friends and family, even though the stresses they face on the job can affect their loved ones.

Those who have mental health conditions or experience symptoms can have positive outcomes if they have the right support from family, friends, and their workplace. Families, especially, can help in tackling barriers and improving the mental health of their loved ones.



## Signs and Symptoms

### Physical

Providers experiencing any of the following symptoms should seek IMMEDIATE medical attention:

- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Severe pain
- Symptoms of shock

If responders experience the following symptoms over time or if they become severe, seek medical attention.

- Fatigue
- Nausea/vomiting
- Dizziness
- Profuse sweating
- Thirst
- Headaches
- Visual difficulties
- Clenching of jaw
- Nonspecific aches and pains

### Behavioral

As a result of a traumatic incident, providers may notice the following behavioral changes in themselves or coworkers:

- Intense anger
- Withdrawal
- Emotional outburst
- Temporary loss or increase of appetite
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Inability to rest, pacing
- Change in sexual functioning

### Cognitive

If symptoms occur on the scene, responders may not be able to stay clearly focused to maintain their own safety or to help patients in distress.

Responders may experience momentary cognitive symptoms; however, if symptoms are chronic or interfere with daily activities, workers should seek medical attention. Should these symptoms become severe, they should seek medical attention.

- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Heightened or lowered alertness
- Poor concentration
- Poor problem solving
- Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
- Memory problems
- Nightmares

### Emotional

Strong emotions are ordinary reactions to traumatic or extraordinary situations. Providers should seek support from a professional if distress continues for several weeks or if they interfere with daily activities.

- Anxiety or severe panic (rare)
- Guilt/sense of failure
- Denial
- Grief
- Fear
- Irritability
- Loss of emotional control
- Depression
- Feeling overwhelmed

## HAVING A CONVERSATION

It's common to feel unsure about how to talk about anxiety or depression, or to worry about saying the wrong thing. Here are some useful phrases people who have experienced anxiety or depression say are most helpful to hear during difficult times. These are statements in a conversation which help someone to feel listened to, understood, and hopeful that things can improve.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><i>"I'm here for you."</i></p>   | <p>Anxiety and depression can make people feel very isolated and alone. Hearing someone say explicitly that they'll be there, and will stick by you during recovery, can really help. Of course, it's most important that you follow through on that promise.</p>   |
| <p><i>"I know it doesn't feel like it now but there is hope that things can get better."</i></p>                                  | <p>Encourage hope. Remind them that anxiety and depression are treatable, and with the right support, most people recover.</p>  |
| <p><i>"I'm not sure what to do, but I'm sure we can figure it out together."</i></p>  | <p>You don't have to always have the answers — and it's best not to pretend you do. What's important is that you're willing to stick around and help them figure out how to start feeling better.</p>   |
| <p><i>"What can I do to help? Just tell me how."</i></p>  | <p>Ask them to be honest about how you can help them. The support they need will change throughout their recovery so be prepared to be flexible. Taking initiative and doing small things to show you care can also help.</p>   |
| <p><i>"I can see this is a really hard time for you."</i></p>   | <p>Validating that the experience of anxiety and depression is difficult, is one of the most helpful things you can say. The least helpful statements are those that shut down the conversation ("I know how you feel," "just snap out of it," "you're attention seeking," "think more positively," "you'll be alright," "just get over it").</p> |
| <p><i>"Have you thought about seeing your doctor or calling the employee assistance program? There is support available."</i></p> | <p>Highlight the importance of seeking professional support. Friends and family can offer a great deal of support, but professionals have a crucial role in treating anxiety and depression and promoting recovery.</p>   |

*“This conversation is between you and me.”*

It’s important you can be trusted. Respect their privacy by not sharing what they tell you with anyone unless they say you can (unless they are at risk of hurting themselves).

*“I’m sorry if I said the wrong thing. Can we start again?”*

Don’t beat yourself up if you say the wrong thing, or offence is taken to something you say. You’re both trying to talk through a difficult experience. Focus on what’s more important in the conversation.

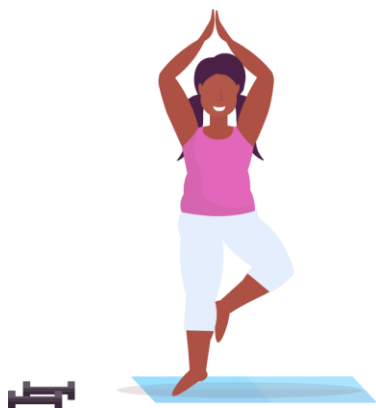
*“I have noticed you seem to be doing better lately. Is that how it feels for you?”*

Noticing the positive changes can be hard to spot, particularly if they are small and gradual. But gently pointing out your observations can help them to feel like things might just be improving.

*“Do you feel like doing something together to help take your mind off things?”*

It’s best not to talk about how they’re feeling all the time. Engaging in activity, you both enjoy can help people with anxiety and depression change the focus of their negative thinking and offer a sense of hope for the future.

## SELF CARE



When a loved one experiences a mental illness, their care and support can take a lot of time and energy. But your own needs are just as important, too. If you aren’t well, it’s harder to help someone else regain wellness. Here are some tips to think about.

1. Accept your own feelings and know that you are not alone

It is natural to feel many different emotions when a loved one is diagnosed with a mental illness. Other people experience the same challenges and complicated mix of emotions, just like you. Let yourself feel whatever you need to feel.

2. Learn more

Take time to learn more about mental illnesses and how it relates to your first responder. This will give you a better understanding of your loved one’s experiences and help you see what they may be going through. You can find reliable information online, through medical health services, and through community organizations.

3. Stay connected

Embarrassment, social stigma and fear can stop many family members from seeking help when a loved one is diagnosed with a mental illness. But that can isolate you at a time when you need the most support from

others. Talk to trusted friends and family and let them know what you're experiencing. If you aren't sure where to go, try connecting with a community organization.

#### 4. Join a support group

Support groups are a good place to share your experiences, learn from others, and connect with people who understand what you're going through. To find a local support group, contact a local community mental health organization or visit <https://disasterassets.org/about-disaster-responder-assets-network>.



#### 5. Take time for yourself

If you are caring for a loved one, your responsibilities may use up your physical and emotional energy. It's important to take time for yourself. It can help you recharge and give you a more balanced perspective toward any challenges you experience. Schedule opportunities that allow you to relax, have fun and get away so you can come back to your loved one with a healthier outlook. You can't care for someone else if you haven't cared for yourself first.

#### 6. Seek help for yourself

Caring for a loved one who's unwell can be stressful. Long periods of stress can lead to mental health or substance use problems. Seek help if you find your own well-being slipping and encourage family members to seek help if they need it. Mental illness can also have a big impact on family relationships. Family counseling may be beneficial.

#### 7. Develop coping strategies for challenging behaviors

There may be times when a loved one shows strange or challenging behaviors that can make you feel confused, embarrassed, or scared. This can happen in public or in private. It's best to talk with your loved one's care team for strategies to manage challenging situations. Here are some tips:

- Learn more about your options.
- Plan the best strategies for the situation.
- Understand that this is not personal.
- Realize that some behaviors may be beyond your loved one's control. They may be as distressing to them as they are to you.

It's also important to tell your loved one what behavior you aren't willing to tolerate. You have rights, too — you never have to tolerate dangerous or abusive behavior



## RESOURCES FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

### For Your Health

Ulliance can help

If you're feeling overwhelmed and need to talk, or if you'd like assistance in locating some of the resources we touched on in this bulletin, contact your Life Advisor EAP (800.448.8326) for free and confidential assistance with any work/life or personal issue.

Emergency Chaplain Group

Emotional and spiritual support for first-responders experiencing extraordinary human events daily.

- Phone: (855) 436 2427

- Email - [Em.office@emchap.org](mailto:Em.office@emchap.org)

Code Green - <https://codegreencampaign.org/>

First Responders Suicide Prevention Resources Center - <https://www.sprc.org/settings/first-responders>

Institute for Responder Wellness - <https://instituteforresponderwellness.com/>

### For Your Family

Support for the whole family - [allclearfoundation.org/](http://allclearfoundation.org/)

CSTS (Center for Study of Traumatic Stress) – Provider and Family Resources

<https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerginginfectious-disease-outbreaks-response>

First Responder Emergency Response Fund - <https://1strcf.org/>

A Post-Deployment Guide for Families of Emergency and Disaster Response Workers -

[https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/emergencypreparedness/resilience resources/support documents/postdeploy/families\\_nmh05-0220.html](https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/emergencypreparedness/resilience%20resources/support%20documents/postdeploy/families_nmh05-0220.html)



\*Information gathered from Michigan.gov and bcfirstrespondersmentalhealth.com