

# COVID-19 Behavioral Health Considerations



As a result of a routine interaction with medically compromised adults in both community and healthcare settings, fire and EMS personnel are at increased risk for exposure to the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Visit the **IAFF Coronavirus Resource** for important information and updates.

While the virus presents a greater health risk to certain individuals, fear and anxiety can quickly spread to your surrounding social network.

It is common for the family, friends and coworkers of high-risk individuals to feel on edge during this time. Even if you are not considered to be in a high-risk group, you may experience heightened anxiety if you have a loved one who has been quarantined, tested positive for the virus, is elderly or has a chronic medical condition, faces increased risk due to occupational exposure, or who has a history of anxiety, including somatic symptom disorder or health anxiety disorder.

## Protecting Fire/EMS Personnel

For current recommendations on dispatch protocols, personal protective equipment (PPE), decontamination and other essential topics, visit [www.iaff.org/coronavirus](http://www.iaff.org/coronavirus)

## COMMON STRESS REACTIONS

Everyone reacts differently to an infectious disease outbreak. While some go about their usual business, others will experience persistent anxiety, worry or fear related to the disease and a range of issues, including emotional, behavioral and physical reactions<sup>1</sup>. If these reactions begin to interfere with your daily functioning, consider talking to a mental health provider. Reactions may include:

- Worrying about your own health status
- Worrying about the health status of your loved ones
- Sleeping too much or not enough
- Changes in appetite
- Inability to fall asleep or stay asleep
- Difficulty concentrating due to persistent worry
- Worsening of other chronic health problems
- Increased time or energy devoted to monitoring physical symptoms
- Seeking reassurance from family, friends and doctors
- Increased use of substances to help relax (alcohol, tobacco, drugs or food)

## WHAT TO EXPECT IF YOU OR A LOVED ONE IS QUARANTINED

If you think you were exposed to an individual infected with coronavirus, consult your fire department immediately. If family members or loved ones believe they were exposed, they should contact their local health department immediately. Exposed individuals will be required to enter a 14-day quarantine. Individuals in high-risk groups with no history of exposure or current symptoms may proactively choose to avoid interaction with the public or may be directed to do so by their doctor.

Quarantine can be a stressful experience. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reports it is normal to experience some anxiety and worry while under quarantine. Concern may center around a range of issues, including fears of developing the virus or disease, how time off from work may impact your job or finances or how to find care for children or others in your care. You may also fear resentment from friends, family or coworkers who are concerned about their own exposure. In addition, the challenge of securing basic items, such as groceries and personal care items, may produce anxiety.

### What is COVID-19?

For more information on COVID-19, including key symptoms, transmission and prevention visit [www.iaff.org/coronavirus](http://www.iaff.org/coronavirus)

Other emotional reactions to quarantine may include:

- Uncertainty and frustration about how long the quarantine will last
- Loneliness or resentment associated with feeling cut off from the world
- Anger if you believe you were exposed to the disease due to others' negligence
- Boredom and restlessness caused by the inability to work or engage in regular day-to-day activities
- A sense of helplessness, confusion or ambivalence about the situation

Knowing what to expect in the event of a quarantine may help you to reduce this anxiety, establish realistic expectations and have a plan. See the CDC's COVID-19 Guide [Get Your Home Ready](#).

### Everyone Has a Role to Play

Consistently **follow common sense precautions** to reduce the spread of germs. Wash your hands often, avoid contact with sick people, stay home if you are sick, cover coughs and sneezes, and disinfect your home regularly. Give yourself credit for your efforts in this area and praise others in your family (especially kids and teens) who remain vigilant as well.

<sup>1</sup>Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health: Tips For Social Distancing, Quarantine, And Isolation During An Infectious Disease Outbreak. Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014).