

## **What to Do When You Are an Essential Worker during the Coronavirus Pandemic.**

*These strategies may help ease stress when you're on the job as an essential employee.*

The work of our first responders during the coronavirus pandemic has been critically important. Our first responders have been selfless and continue to work tirelessly in the medical field. However, there are other types essential workers who are equally selfless and critically important. These workers serve their communities in this time of need. These are the employees who work at our municipal agencies (fire fighters, police, etc), in grocery stores, gas stations, postal workers, banks and all other essential businesses/agencies. These individuals, who are keeping our communities fed, safe and fire-free, delivering our meals and mail, performing transactions at the bank, driving trains and buses to keep public transport alive, or providing customer support when our WIFI goes down are stressed and scared as well.

These essential workers have to leave their homes and go to work each day, and they may not always be getting support or acknowledgement for their critical work from their community members.

The stress of not being able to socially distance themselves and having to go to work each day can sometimes feel overwhelming and perhaps harder to perform at work or feel happy and at ease while at home. To add to their worry, they may be interacting with anxious people throughout the day, and that emotional context can unconsciously increase their own anxieties. Here are a few steps to help with coping:

**1. Accepting how you feel.** “Know that it is normal to be stressed or have anxiety,” says Sigal Barsade, Ph.D., a professor of management at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

Once you’ve accepted that it’s OK to be overwhelmed and fearful during this time, you can then turn to unpacking your emotions. Are you engaging in behaviors that are only increasing your anxious thoughts, like endlessly scrolling through social media? Or perhaps you’re speaking to many other anxious people, fueling what Barsade calls “emotional contagion.” “When you have a lot of anxiety coming from many different sources, including family, friends, social media, news, and more, you can have a cycle of anxious contagion that makes you more stressed than you actually need to be,” Barsade explains.

However, Barsade says that the more you become aware of the sources of your anxiety, the better equipped you are to handle them. If it’s the news media that sends you spiraling, setting a news cutoff time and encouraging any stressed out family members to do the same, can help alleviate the upset you might feel after listening to the news to help keep your stress in check. The same pertains to scrolling your social media links. Perhaps trading listening to the news to your favorite music for an hour or more may be of help.

You can also benefit from reminding yourself of the deep importance and meaning in the work you’re doing — while it’s certainly stressful, you should also take well-deserved pride in performing an essential service for your community. Indeed, studies reveal that those who find meaning and purpose in their work experience less anxiety. Barsade also recommends leaning into practices that bring you a sense of calm, like meditating, trying at-home workouts, and engaging in positive (virtual) interactions with friends and family (i.e. FaceTime, Skype, Zoom or phone calls) or simply take a walk outside.

For many essential workers, heading to work in these challenging times isn't a source of anxiety we can *completely* eradicate. But these micro-steps can help protect both physical and mental well-being while on the job during COVID-19.

**2. Each morning before work, put a few spare napkins or tissues in your bag/pocket.**

Use them to open doors and reduce contact with surfaces in the course of your day. If it's possible for your work, using disposable gloves is another option.

**3. Ask your colleagues to say “hands!” if they notice you touching your face.** You can do the same for them too.

Having others hold you accountable will help you build awareness of the triggers that lead to idle face touching — with a bit of humor, too.

**4. Swap a handshake for an elbow bump or another friendly gesture.**

Even a warm smile can help us feel the power of connection from a safe personal distance.

**5. When you’re washing your hands, take the 20 seconds to think of three things you are grateful for.**

Taking this time to reflect on what you’re grateful for will help you meet C.D.C. guidelines for lowering your risk of viral infection while reinforcing a more positive mindset. Silently humming one of your favorite songs is another fun option.

**6. Wipe down your workstation (steering wheel, equipment, etc) at the end of the day.**

Consider this a way to physically wipe away your stresses from the day while keeping viral contaminants at bay.

**7. Every time you walk in your front door (at home), apply hand sanitizer before opening up the door.** Then wash your hands with soap and water once you are inside your home.

By habit stacking this new routine on top of an existing behavior, you’ll make sure you’re automatically cleansing any germs and protecting yourself and others.

***Remember, HelpNet is here to support you – 800-969-6162***