



COVID-19:

**Professionals who
respond in critical
situations**

IERT

IMMEDIATE EMERGENCY RESPONSE
TEAM
PSYCHO-SOCIAL
INTERVENTION

INTRODUCTION

These materials have been edited taking, as a reference, those previously created by the Immediate Emergency Response Teams (IERT - ERIE in Spanish) for Psycho-social Intervention, and specifically adapting them for the COVID-19 crisis. They are produced by volunteers who are specialists in psycho-social intervention, with experience in other crises and emergencies, and with the aim of helping all those people who may need these recommendations for the performance of their work.

To all of them. Thank you.

1. – Who it is for

This document has been produced specifically for the situation generated by the COVID-19 coronavirus crisis. The existing manuals of the Immediate Emergency Response Teams, and those published by the Psycho-social Support Reference Centre of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent have been taken into consideration, among others.

It is intended for all those who, in the performance of their work or voluntary action, have taken care of people who have contracted COVID-19, or of their families, have participated in work in support of specific resources during this crisis, or who continue working to minimise the vulnerability of people, from any programme, project or individual action.

It does not attempt to be a specialist document for Mental Health professionals, but a compilation of information and general recommendations.

2. - Justification

Crisis or emergency situations, such as that which is currently being experienced, generate a series of physical, social and psychological consequences in those who confront it, which are essential to address.

This crisis, in addition to sharing many elements with others, has some differentiating characteristics which mean that the approach to dealing with it may require strategies that had not been implemented before:

- **Risk of contagion:** There is not always this risk for professionals who manage emergency situations, which is why another degree of personal involvement is added which can represent an added difficulty.

- **Impossibility of direct intervention:** Even though the intervention is face-to-face, it will be carried out with protective material that marks a distance with the person who is being cared for. This greatly hinders verbal, nonverbal and other communication strategies that complement case management and add humanity and closeness.

- **Uncertainty of the duration:** The organisation and planning of intervention strategies usually vary, depending on the time they are expected to last. Currently, the uncertainty and ignorance regarding the evolution of this crisis necessitate a daily evaluation and redirection of the intervention, adding a stressor element for the collaborating professionals.

- **Community dimension:** Although emergencies tend to have an approach that transcends the individual sphere, the responders usually manage their difficulties in a personal manner. In this crisis, the community dimension becomes especially relevant, since its resolution depends on common and global work. The change of perspective can produce conflict and delay the response.

- **Confinement and quarantine:** These very particular circumstances do not usually occur in the critical situations faced by responders. The fact that their relatives and friends are in confinement can reduce the social support network which they generally make use of. In addition, if you begin to have suspicious symptoms, you should remain in quarantine and cannot continue your work, this can increase your level of frustration and anger.

Multiple studies state that emotional difficulties are increased in emergency situations, and the reactions, such as anxiety, stress and depressive symptoms, usually appear in people without any previous psychological disorder.

Therefore, it is important to know what it is happening, to suitably interpret the symptoms of malaise, and to activate the natural coping mechanisms that people possess.

3. - Normal psychological consequences







People react to unexpected situations of uncertainty, generating a natural bodily response: the alert response, commonly known as stress.

This stress, in addition to being the body's natural reaction to a dangerous demand or situation, is responsible for activating the coping resources. When this reaction is prolonged over time, or becomes too intense, it ceases to be adaptive and can become a problem, impacting the effectiveness of the individual. If not adequately approached, it may even develop a pathological condition.

During, and after, these situations, people may face a series of reactions that are a manifestation of this stress response. These reactions are normal and adaptive, and serve to activate coping strategies.

In order to understand them better, they can be differentiated into thoughts, physiological symptoms, emotional reactions and habitual behaviours:

Thoughts

 <p>Images and thoughts related to COVID-19</p> <p>They often appear at unexpected moments even though the person does not want to think about them</p>	 <p>Nightmares related to COVID-19</p> <p>They can be explicitly about the virus or subjects related to death or other human dilemmas</p>
 <p>Confusion and disorientation</p> <p>Disordered thoughts. Difficulty ordering recently experienced memories</p>	 <p>Problems of memory and concentration</p> <p>Difficulty retaining recent information and in concentrating on specific tasks that require attention</p>
 <p>Loss of confidence and change in the system of values</p> <p>Doubting the values and beliefs that were held until now. Faith can also be lost, which increases the feeling of vulnerability</p>	 <p>Guilt</p> <p>For having said or done something, or for just the opposite. For not being able to help more, for feeling sad, or for thinking that you should feel some other way</p>

Physiological symptoms



Activation

Accelerated pulse, hyperactivity, excess activation, hypersensitivity, intense irritation.



Change in sleep/ eating patterns

By excess or defect



Physical and corporal pain

Headache, stomach ache, joint pain. Physical fatigue can also appear



Other unusual reactions

Tics, skin eruptions, allergies

Emotional reactions



Sadness, hopelessness or loss of interest

They are usually feelings that appear during the greater part of the day



Fear or worry that something bad will happen

The world is seen as a threat and not as a safe place. This causes the future to be lived with fear



Weeping easily or hypersensitivity

Any negative information causes tears. Negative emotions take place when thinking about situations related to COVID-19



Apathy or incapacity to feel

Apathy or lack of desire to do things is usually related to these types of situations. Sometimes people also have difficulty feeling emotions

Behaviours



Isolation, the need to be alone
The urge not to maintain contact with close social surroundings, not even virtually



Substance abuse
Increased intake of alcohol, tobacco or other addictive substances

Although these are the reactions that can be expected, the manner of confronting the situation, and its effects, can vary, based on multiple factors:

- Type of task or activity that has been assigned to the responder.
- Proximity to people in a vulnerable situation (direct intervention work versus management, organisation and planning work).
- Type of professional group to which they pertain (health personnel, security forces, firefighters, etc.).
- Preparation, previous experience and professional training.
- Social and family variables (children or dependents, employment situation, etc.)
- Physical and psychological variables (previous pathologies, stressful life events, present emotional state, etc.)

Not all the responders will present each of these reactions, although it is important that they know how to recognise and identify them to be able to confront them. It is essential to detect when they cease to be normal, in this situation, because this will be an important criterion for determining the search for professional help.

4. - When the help of Mental Health professionals should be requested

Although the majority of the symptoms will disappear in time, after the emergency situation is over, it is possible that a small percentage of people will need professional support to recover.

Mental health professionals are very used to working with the difficulties that can arise after a situation like the one in question and, generally, after their intervention, people are able to move forward without any difficulties.

As has been said, the reactions mentioned in the previous section, are normal and usual in the first weeks, after responding to a critical situation, but if some of these variables are identified, it would be essential to ask for professional help:

When to request professional help?

- 01** If the intensity of the symptoms is excessive or out of proportion
- 02** The symptoms do not diminish after 4 to 6 weeks following the end of the critical situation
- 03** If the person suffers from symptoms, they undergo an abrupt change of personality
- 04** Serious difficulties appear in their spheres of development: social, family, employment
- 05** The person experiences a significant degree of malaise

5. - Well-being recommendations for professionals

These are recommendations which help to withstand highly emotional situations, both for professionals, who usually dedicate themselves to this work, and for voluntary personnel, who work sporadically in critical situations.

- **Take care of your basic needs:**

Eating, hydration, physiological needs and sleep are indispensable. Sometimes, in intervention situations with a large workload, these needs can fade into the background. Maintaining a bad routine can cause physical problems in the medium-term.

- **Disconnect**

Taking a break now and then will reflect in better care towards others.

Whenever possible, allow yourself to do something unrelated to work that is comforting, relaxing, or fun for you: listening to music, reading a book, watching a series, playing sports, or painting, are some examples that can serve to disconnect from work.

Relaxation techniques, mindfulness, meditation or other techniques, related to awareness, also work, as long as they are practiced habitually and with some training.

Respect for rest breaks during your working day: some people can feel guilty if they are not working full-time, or if they are taking time to "disconnect" when there is a lot of work to do, but rest is essential for good performance and for minimising errors.

- **Plan a routine outside of work**

The schedules and routines that existed before the State of Emergency have changed completely. This makes it necessary to plan schedules, giving space to daily exercise routines, hobbies and disconnection tasks, contact with loved ones and friends, a space for information about what is happening, and of course, for rest breaks and eating.

- **Maintain contact with companions**

Research on the care of emergency professionals speaks about the benefit of mutual support. Speak with your companions with whom you have a good relationship, and avoid the isolation that this situation can produce, through fear or anxiety.

Shares the difficulties, but also spend some time sharing the achievements at the end of each working day. It is very likely that the feelings and emotions will be very similar across the whole team, which is why this generates a feeling of belonging and normality.

- **Share information constructively**

Communicate with your companions clearly and encouragingly. Identify errors or deficiencies and transmit them constructively to correct them: focus on how things can be improved, and not so much on criticism. Work in a team: share the frustrations and the solutions, taking into account that the resolution of problems is a skill which benefits the whole team.

- **Observe yourself and allow yourself to request help if necessary**

Detect the signs of stress and learn to manage them. Self-control will provide you with stability against this prolonged situation of stress.

Remember that unpleasant emotions are going to appear and it is normal, it is not a threat, it is a way of reacting to danger.

Observe yourself during, and after, the emergency, so that you are able to detect any symptom that is enduring, increasing in intensity, or interfering in your day-to-day life. Activate your personal resources and, if necessary, speak with companions and/or seek help.

At the end of this document, you will find useful informative graphics that summarise some of the aspects discussed above.

How to manage stress in the face of the **COVID-19** crisis



It is normal to have feelings of **sadness, stress, confusion or fear** during a crisis situation.

Speaking with people you have confidence in can help you: Contact your close friends and relatives.



Take into account that not everything that is said about the virus is reliable.

Stay up-to-date and only use information from official sources and health authorities.



Avoid constantly watching the news to reduce worry and the sensation of alarm. Limit the times and only inform yourself at certain times of the day.



Think about all the personal skills and abilities that have served you in the past to confront adverse situations.

Source: WHO

More Information at:
www.cruzroja.es



If you have to stay at home, maintain a healthy lifestyle, which includes a **suitable diet, rest, physical exercise and telephone contact with relatives and friends.**



Manage your emotions in a healthy manner and ask for help if you need it.

If you feel that the situation is overwhelming you, **contact mental health professionals,** who can advise and help you in a healthy way.



COVID-19: 10 tips for your well-being as a volunteer



1

Information gives security.

Base it on official media and avoid fake news. Avoid over-information. You need the right information to control what you do with calmness.

2

Take good care of yourself to be able to help others.

As they say in aircraft "Put your own oxygen mask on before putting them on others."

3

Try to follow your daily routines.

It is probably different, but not in essence. Maintain routines before going to bed, it will help you get to sleep.

4

Take care of body and mind.

Eat healthy, light meals at least 3 times a day and hydrate frequently, avoiding energy drinks, coffee or alcohol. And take exercise!

5

Stop analysing what you feel and share it.

It will help you to ease stress, and to assimilate and understand what is happening to you. If you share, you will see that they are normal reactions to an exceptional situation.

6

Focus on your day-to-day.

Do not become scared or concerned about things we do not know will happen. We often generate unnecessary distress. Keep calm.

7

Support yourself in your surroundings.

In your Red Cross team and with your loved ones. Promote communication, and, if possible, make video calls so as not to lose visual and verbal communication.

8

Use creativity and intelligent humour:

In these situations, they help us to assimilate the situation positively.

9

Do not trivialise your risk, but also do not magnify it.

Try to be an objective person.

10

Sometimes, it is necessary to know how to SAY NO. Remember that this situation also affects us as people. Ask for help if you need it. It does not matter if you have to remove yourself for a while in order to feel better. You will return with renewed strength and you will be of greater help when other companions are not feeling well.

