



**BEHAVIOURAL
SCIENCES
COLLECTIVE**

**This report was published on the
Behavioural Sciences Collective**

<https://bscresearch.com.sg>

Title:

How can Leaders Prevent and Manage Fatigue?

Author(s):

Charmaine Lee, Psychologist, HTBSC

Citation:

Lee, C. (2020). *How can leaders prevent and manage fatigue?* (Psychological Resilience Against COVID-19 Issue 01/2020). Singapore: Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre.

Copyright © 2020. All rights are reserved. Views expressed in this publication are the authors' only and do not represent or imply any official position or view. This publication is intended to stimulate further discussion about the topic.

Uploaded on April 2020. Please direct any correspondence to contact@bscresearch.com.sg

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AGAINST COVID-19

-An initiative by Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre-

Issue 01/2020

How can Leaders Prevent and Manage Fatigue?

By Charmaine Lee (Psychologist), HTBSC/MHA

Feel like no amount of caffeine is enough to keep you going?

Did you know?

In the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, a study on 5,305 public servants involved in frontline operations revealed that various aspects of crisis operations (e.g., working in human services, long overtime hours, poor communication) was linked to increased exhaustion and hence burnout.

Since the first COVID-19 case in Singapore was detected on 23 January, public officers have been roped in to support the COVID-19 operations in various functions. While it remains uncertain when the situation will stabilise and operations conclude, it is likely that there remains a long battle ahead.

It is hence key for leaders to help manage both the physical and mental fatigue levels of their team(s) so that they can sustain their roles and their sense of wellbeing for the longer-term.

What can you do if your team is on the brink of a burnout with no clear end date to the operations?

(1) Assess the state of fatigue

To prevent fatigue, leaders have to first be aware of what contributes to and what prevents fatigue. For instance, the physical discomfort of donning PPE, constant vigilance about one's risk of infection, maintaining high levels of performance over time in complex environments can exacerbate fatigue.

To manage fatigue, leaders would have to first be able to identify it. Leaders may use a checklist like the one shown below to assess fatigue levels within their team(s).

| <i>Serial</i> | <i>Behaviour or Sign</i> | <i>Absent</i> | <i>Occasional</i> | <i>Frequent</i> |
|--------------------|---|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Unsatisfactory attention to personal hygiene (eg. not shaving or dressing wounds regularly) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 2. | Poor work output (eg. many errors in message transmissions) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 3. | Slowed / slurred speech | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 4. | Slowed responsiveness (to conversation, noises, any stimulus) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 5. | Unstable posture (eg. swaying, hunched shoulders, drooping head) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 6. | Micro-sleeps (momentary lapses from consciousness) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 7. | Hallucinations (eg. seeing 'walking bushes' or imaginary snipers) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 8. | Obvious forgetfulness | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 9. | Irritability (eg. uncharacteristic complaining or bickering) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 10. | Confusion / disorientation (eg. uncertain of pit location or current task) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 11. | Headaches (revealed by cradling the head, furrowed brows) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 12. | Blurred vision (eg. squinting / rubbing the eyes, difficulty reading) | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Subtotals | | | | |
| Total | | | | |
| Total Score | | Suggested response | | |
| 0 - 8 | | No immediate action required | | |
| 9 - 16 | | Nap required | | |
| 17 - 24 | | Extended sleep required | | |

[Adapted from: Murphy, P.J. (2002). *Fatigue Management During Operations: A Commander's Guide*. Doctrine Wing Land: Warfare Development Centre.]

Beyond encouraging team members to shift towards healthier practices, leaders and supervisors should also urge them to look out for early signs of fatigue in one another before it escalates further.

(2) Simple re-design of work environment

Try making simple adjustments to the team working conditions. Here are some ways to do so:

- Leaders can ensure that work spaces are well-lit and comfortable (e.g., shelter for outdoor work, seats if the officers have to stand for a long time, ventilation for indoor spaces).

- The availability of conducive facilities (e.g., clean, comfortable, quiet, supply of healthy refreshments) for officers to catch a short break and recover (scan the QR code under the Annex section to find out more on micro-breaks) would be key to preventing the onset of fatigue.
- After a long and/or night shift, the provision of transportation home or claimables may ensure officers' limited energy resources are not further depleted through a long and tedious commute to their homes.
- Examine which duties can be monotonous. These lead to fatigue (e.g., transfer of data, guarding quarantine facilities) as well. In such cases, a buddy system can be implemented and social interaction, where possible, encouraged so as to ensure officers are kept mentally stimulated.
- Where operationally feasible, changing background stimulation (e.g., keeping a radio on) can be introduced to help officers sustain focus. Additionally, periodic movement (e.g., light stretches) can help alleviate bodily tension and enhance alertness.

(3) Review work arrangements regularly

- To allow for recovery from fatigue, officers should be supported in clocking a minimum of 7 hours of uninterrupted sleep for two consecutive nights. Putting in place a roster that will allow all officers sufficient time within the week to rest and fully recover is key to ensuring that they are able to sustain their roles.
- It is also critical that officers rest at regular hours (e.g., from 11pm every night) for effective recovery.
- Work arrangements (e.g., team rotations for night duties) should be constantly reviewed to prevent any one officer from having to maintain a high level of alertness and performance with inadequate downtime over a prolonged period.

(4) Adopt a calm leadership style, where possible

- Fatigue can result in mistakes. When an officer is near exhaustion, certain oversights may occur unintentionally due to their impacted physical and mental state (e.g., decreased attention). A punitive leadership style in such demanding work conditions may further add to the mental demands faced by the officer individual and may dampen his/her motivation.
- In contrast, an approach of *reassuring* rather than *pressuring* can free up the officer's bandwidth to tackle the challenges faced at work.
- Think through communication plans – a 'brief-back' procedure (i.e., to repeat the message or instructions) may also be adopted to ensure understanding and prevent miscommunication.

#SGUnited – Banding Together to Tide through Challenging Times

In testing times like the ongoing COVID-19 situation, mutual support within teams should be encouraged to keep each other's fatigue levels in check. The supportive environment that officers come to work to would also go a long way in ensuring that are able to persevere towards their goals.

References

LeClair, M. A. (2001). *Fatigue management for aerospace expeditionary forces deployment and sustained operations*. Air Command and Staff College, Air University.

Murphy, P.J. (2002). *Fatigue Management During Operations: A Commander's Guide*. Doctrine Wing Land: Warfare Development Centre.

Suzuki, Y., Fukasawa, M., Obara, A., & Kim, Y. (2017). Burnout among public servants after the Great East Japan Earthquake: decomposing the construct aftermath of disaster. *Journal of occupational health*, 16-0263.

Workplace Safety and Health Council (2010). *Workplace Safety & Health Guidelines: Fatigue Management*. Retrieved from <https://www.wshc.sg/>

ANNEX

Scan the QR code or access the link below to learn more about micro-breaks!



<https://tinyurl.com/micbreak>



Charmaine Lee is a Psychologist at the Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre. Please feel free to contact her at Charmaine_LEE@mha.gov.sg.

This series is brought to you by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Home Team psychological service agencies. Views expressed in this publication are the authors' only and do not represent or imply any official position or view of any HTD or MHA. These commentaries may be reproduced with permission from the Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre.