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Public Service leaders are humans too: Looking after yourself during COVID-19 operations

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# PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AGAINST COVID-19

-An initiative by Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre-

**Issue 03/2020**

## **Public Service leaders are humans too: Looking after yourself during COVID-19 operations**

**By Pamela Goh (Research Analyst), HTBSC/MHA**

Many Public Service leaders and supervisors serve as front liners in the fight against COVID-19. During these protracted operations, leaders inevitably face many different stressors. To achieve mission success and continuity in daily operations, it is vital for leaders to know how to look after oneself. This is necessary in order for leaders and supervisors to continue to be effective across time.

### **How can I look after myself during this crisis? Tips for Public Service leaders**

#### **(1) Acknowledge your emotions (when it is safe to do so): It is normal to feel anxious and afraid sometimes, in unpredictable times like this.**

- The nature and outlook of the COVID-19 pandemic remains uncertain, and this creates anxiousness and fear in people. Public Service leaders and supervisors are not immune to such negative emotions during a crisis as such, and may experience them even as a team leader. Recognising and acknowledging that you may experience these feelings is critical and beneficial.
- The main approach in overcoming these feelings is to accept and come to terms with them. Avoiding or pushing the anxiety and fear away will lead to negative consequences, such as prolonging and intensifying these negative feelings<sup>1</sup>.
- Leaders and supervisors should also take note if they find themselves expressing unusual behaviours, such as: changes in sleep patterns, easily getting angry, and being less patient at work<sup>2</sup>. Such warning signs may indicate the need to slow down and do a self-check, or even seek external and further support (if you need it). For instance, you can find a stress support buddy to talk to (in safe space)!

#### **(2) Engage in relaxation exercises to help regulate emotions**

- Regulating your emotions will allow you to continue to function effectively and execute your duties. Exercises to regulate emotions include deep breathing and mindfulness. See infographic below.

- These exercises can help you find calmness, peace, and stability amidst frightening realities and uncertainties. They help to relieve stress and allow you to relax.



How to do deep breathing exercise (Adapted from Noyze.org)

### **(3) Adopt proper self-care practices<sup>#</sup>, such as obtaining sufficient sleep**

- Maintaining proper sleep hygiene is important to regulate anxiety. Getting enough sleep is also critical to ensure that the body is well-rested and recharged.
- If obtaining sufficient sleep at night is not possible, then engaging in power naps whenever possible will be useful. Power naps can also combat fatigue, promote alertness, and reduce stress. Power naps usually last for about 20 to 30 minutes – so try to avoid sleeping beyond this time period! Anything beyond 30 minutes can make you feel worse than not napping at all. Find somewhere comfortable with the least amount of distractions, but not too comfortable such that waking up becomes difficult.
- Other vital self-care practices that leaders and supervisors should adopt include: avoiding alcohol, reducing caffeine intake, engaging in exercises.

*<sup>#</sup>For some tips on how you can engage in proper self-care, please see the infographics at the end of this article.*

### **(4) Build a strong informal social support network**

- Family and friends serve as a reliable support system outside the workplace; at work, having trusted colleagues to turn to is also important. But remember to maintain safe distancing with friends during this time – so try a phone call or a skype session instead!
- Having a support system both at home and work can boost your overall psychological and physical well-being<sup>3</sup>. The people in your support system can provide emotional support, both during normal circumstances and difficult work situations. Another benefit is that you can turn to these reliable figures any time. Overall, it promotes well-being and coping skills, and minimises loneliness or stress. Once again, do remember to maintain safe practices during this COVID-19 pandemic.

### **(5) Be open to receiving formal help**

- It is okay to seek further assistance to manage your emotions and behaviours, especially if your informal social support systems may insufficient, or are unable to provide the right form of assistance required. Recognising the need for external help is actually an important sign of self-awareness of one's limitations.
- An alternative means of seeking support is counselling. Counselling sessions allow people to express themselves, and work on difficult feelings and problems with a trained professional.
- Undergoing counselling does not indicate mental health conditions. Stigma behind seeking psychological help can prevent leaders and supervisors from getting the necessary aid. However, lack of timely assistance can aggravate their negative state. Public Service leaders can turn to their respective psychological departments, if there is any, to seek more information and help from trained psychologists. Alternatively, you can call in to the National CARE Hotline, which is established by the Ministry of Social and Family Development for the main purpose of offering psychological support to the public during this COVID-19 pandemic.

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# HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY

## MIND



### Accept that you cannot control everything.

Put your stress in perspective: Is it really as bad as you think?



### Do your best.

Instead of aiming for perfection, which isn't possible, be proud of however close you get.



### Maintain a positive attitude.

Make an effort to replace negative thoughts with positive ones.



### Learn what triggers your anxiety.

Is it work, family, school, or something else you can identify? Write in a journal when you're feeling stressed or anxious, and look for a pattern.

# HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY

## BODY



### Limit alcohol and caffeine.

Alcohol and caffeine can aggravate anxiety and trigger panic attacks. Instead, drink water.



### Eat well-balanced meals.

Do not skip any meals and always keep healthy, energy-boosting snacks on hand.



### Get enough sleep.

When stressed, your body needs additional sleep and rest. It's important to get 8 hours of sleep per night!



### Exercise daily.

Exercising can help you feel good and maintain your health.



Some tips for looking after oneself during times of stress  
(Adapted from Mental Health America)



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