STRESS REACTIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

I doubt that any of us are escaping added stress during the pandemic. For some it is economic hardship. Where is my next paycheck coming from to live? For business owners it is, “How will my business ever survive?” How can I support my employees? Will I contract the virus? When will this all end?

And we have the supermarket workers, truck drivers, janitors and other cleaning personnel who have to keep the places where we work clean. Then there are the fast-food workers, and delivery people, farmers, and so many others who are doing their jobs behind the scenes that do not receive the recognition for their contributions to the fabric of our daily life. And the stress of our political leaders having to make decisions, at time impossibly difficult decisions.. I know that I have failed to mention many others who are doing their part to move us forward in this time, so to you, I also say: “Thank you!”

For my first responder friends….police, fire/ems, 911 dispatchers, corrections officers, whose jobs have always been very stressful and often dangerous, there is the added overlay of dealing with a stressed public that acts out in often reckless and ways that further endanger the first responder and others in the general public. Add to that the underlying fear that that first responder will contract the virus from the public they are dealing with and further endanger their families they return home to. And many first responders have contracted the COVID-19 virus, with some getting sick, and tragically with some dying. And they are needing more PPE….

What can I say to thank our health care professionals at all levels…I say “thank you” from the bottom of my heart. But that seems terribly inadequate. The stress right now must seem relentless and at times overwhelming. Patients dying in greater frequency and then having to make a phone notification to the next of kin….an incredibly stressful job that I know too well…. And where there is a shortage of life-sustaining ventilators, having to make the decision of who may live and who may die… Some of you pay the price, contracting the virus, and some tragically dying.

And yes there is stress to religious leaders, and chaplains, who want to serve as best as we can at a distance, providing funerals for just a few people or not being able to provide a funeral at all. Reaching out to serve as best as we can without being present. For me, I am eager to join the fray, and roll my sleeves up and do what needs to be done, but for now I will do the best as I can to encourage, to listen, to comfort, and rally us onward, offering a voice of relentless hope where I can.

Stress…Very few will leave this time of pandemic without scars.. PTSD, with all of it’s classic signs. Some will manifest what I often refer to as “death by a thousand cuts”, or prolonged cumulative stress, which leads to many of the same signs as PTSD. It is the result of dealing with stressful event after stressful event after stressful event over a sustained period of time.

There will be added scars of moral injury, caused by the feelings of helplessness in not being able to help someone who is dying. And moral injury to first responders for having to respond to situations that are so cruel that they violate everything that responder believes to be good and just. And yes moral injury caused by people who have tested positive for COVID-19 intentionally go into places where they have contact with people who may well end up contracting the virus, get sick, and even die….

As some of you know, in addition to offering many trainings and presentations of my own I am a long time trainer in Critical Incident Stress Management. (CISM). In CISM we break stress reactions into these categories: Physical, Emotional, Behavioral, Cognitive, and Spiritual. Some of you probably know these but as a refresher, I will go through them briefly to help you mitigate any of the stress symptoms. But there is one crucial requirement to all of this: Self-awareness…

How self-aware are you? Do you really know what the underlying feeling happens to be that drives you? Be self-aware. It is “gut-check time”

I have attached a two-sided sheet that is at the back of the workbook for Group Crisis Intervention CISM, which I commonly give out copies of when I lead debriefings following critical incidents. On the back side of the sheet are some suggestions of healthy things to try to mitigate the stress symptoms.

The spiritual distress/dysfunction category is not included on these sheets but the symptom most often is: Anger at God.

In my trainings I share stories from my experiences in the field that helps us to better understand these categories.

Find time for yourself and find some ways to help out and add meaning to your day. God Bless!