Coping with Stress during the Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak – A guideline
25/03/2020

Dear colleagues,

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may increase the stress level for staff and their families. Fears, anxieties, and worries about the disease and its consequences can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. These feelings are partly a normal reaction as your system is saying: “Hey,- you might be in danger; - you need to be alert!”. It is important to acknowledge these thoughts and feelings and to address them, as they serve a purpose in motivating us to take preventive steps and to stay safe.

Be prepared, for a range of reactions, which may arise related to the following:
- **Your health status.**
- The health status of your family members and loved ones and their access to a support network.
- The challenge of securing daily needs, such as groceries, medicine, or personal care items.
- **Cancelations** of important events, hobbies, or social and recreational activities.
- **Concerns** about being able to take care of your children and others in your care.
- **Concerns** about the continuation of your work and economic security.
- **Uncertainty or frustration** about the future and not knowing what consequences to expect.
- **Social isolation/fear of loss** associated with being cut off from loved ones or fears to lose them.
- **Anger** towards others, if they contaminated others due to negligence or fear of contaminating others if you had the virus.
- **Boredom and frustration** as a result of refraining from social or recreational activities.

**Here are some guiding points and suggestions on how to cope with the current situation:**

1. **Maintain routines and wellbeing practices.** It is stabilizing to maintain a regular daily routine, similar to your routines before but adjusted to the precautionary measures as required. Maintain healthy habits, which keep you well, including regular meal timings, a balanced diet, exercise (even if you need to adapt this), maintaining enough sleep hours and a routine of sleep and waketime. See the WHO pdf for additional tips on managing stress (click here).
2. **Connect with others.** Share your concerns about how you feel with a friend or family member in a balanced amount (talk about other topics of life too). Maintain healthy relationships.
3. **Monitor your moods.** Some of us are quick to notice physical symptoms; however, it is also important to be aware of your emotions and thoughts. Am I feeling anxious most of the time, or frustrated, or angry at anything? There is evidence that simple mindfulness techniques can be very effective in helping us to deal with these feelings. Maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking (click here to watch a good example). Make use of resources online, it is probably a good opportunity to start a 28-day free mindfulness meditation (click here to access).
4. **Media monitoring.** It is vital to refer ONLY to reliable sources to get the correct information and to be updated on the unfolding situation. Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of COVID-19, particularly before you go to sleep as it may hinder a restful sleep. We recommend referring to the WHO website https://www.who.int/ and be alert about fake news. Given that the media coverage globally is tending towards catastrophizing, it is important not to be swept along to a point of irrationality.
5. **Distinguish between what is in your control and what is beyond your control.** In general, stress can be mitigated by an awareness of our sense of control. It is important to be aware of your possibilities to mitigate and to accept what is out of your control. This will allow you to channel our energy rather into constructive actions, and to consciously let go of things that you cannot change.

6. **Practice kindness.** A good antidote to adversity is kindness. Acts of kindness can provide a real boost, both emotionally and neurologically and therefore, we ‘prescribe’ performing you two acts of kindness per day: one towards another person and one for yourself.

7. **Patience and compassion.** We all react differently when stressed – from withdrawing to being irritable. You may come across colleagues and loved ones that require extra doses of patience. Take a deep breath and practice compassion and don’t overreact to perceived offenses. Focus on the good and helpful matters. Be there for one another.

8. **Avoid.** Excessive amounts of caffeine, nicotine, alcohol or comfort food, which may be contra effective and instead increase health issues and anxiety.

9. **Organizational support.** OCHA and the broader UN system are monitoring the situation closely on a global level and are on standby to support in different ways. Refer to the UN HR Coronavirus (COVID-19) webpage for updates. From a psychosocial perspective, we want to emphasize the availability of our staff counsellors.

10. **Help the more vulnerable population.** Reassure your children that they are safe and take time to talk with them about the COVID-19 outbreak in an age-appropriate way. If you want to learn how better to speak to your children about Coronavirus-COVID-19, please click here to access the UNICEF paper.

    Keep in mind that elderly citizens are more at risk of falling sick and may need specific support (access to food and other items), and they are more prone to feelings of loneliness and helplessness. Similarly, individuals with special needs may require specific help and support.

    “Amid every crisis, lies great opportunity”

OCHA Welfare Team