

TAKING THE RUBBER GLOVES OFF OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP:

THE TOP 10 WAYS FIRST RESPONDER COUPLES AND FAMILIES CAN MAKE THE MOST OUT OF COVID-19

BY ASHLEE MARTLAGE, M.A. & MARC KRUSE, Ph.D.

As a first responder couple, you have very different circumstances than your neighbors during times of distress like the current COVID-19 response (assuming you don't live in a cul-de-sac full of families just like yours). Perhaps the most obvious example is that first responder families don't have the opportunity to fully participate in the "public quarantine" that is designed to reduce the risk of exposure. When it's time for your first responder to go to work, he/she goes, no exceptions, to take care of the public. And when he/she leaves, the spouses/partners step up, no exceptions, to take care of everything else.

Unfortunately, these demands can lead to an additional and different type of stress in times of crisis that most other families don't really understand. Fortunately, first responder families are resilient; when they work together, they can get through just about anything. The following considerations, based on personal and professional experience as well as evidence-based practices, are designed to help keep your relationships strong and full of love in these times of uncertainty.

① TAKE THE QUARREL OUT OF QUARANTINE

This is a stressful time that goes above and beyond a hectic "hell week." For many, cabin fever will set in sooner rather than later. Living in close quarters without the benefit of normal life distractions (running errands, taking kids to soccer practice, etc.) can create what feels like a ticking time bomb ready to go off.

So how do you handle it? The first step is making a commitment to each other to not fight but work together to get through this. Actually say this out loud to yourselves and each other so that it can help begin the conversation about how you will successfully navigate this difficult time. It may sound like "we've

been through bigger things than this, we can do this," or "I commit to giving my best to taking care of myself, us, and our family."

Whatever words you use, make sure you set your intention, write it down, and communicate it to your partner.

Research shows that writing down your intentions and goals—and expressing them to your partner—greatly increases the likelihood of being successful. You deserve that and so does your partner.

② ROUTINES: WASHING YOUR "METAPHORICAL" HANDS

Having a consistent, successful transition between work and home is something we always strongly encourage, and may even be more important during times of significant stress. Most first responders are already pretty good at transitioning from home to work, and have developed rituals which help them

prepare for another day at "the office" (putting on their uniform, checking out the apparatus, testing out their equipment, receiving their daily briefing, etc.). Transitioning from work to home is just as important, but not something that's done as consistently and intentionally. If the idea of having a successful



PROVIDED BY THE AUSTIN FIRE DEPARTMENT

transition back home is a new concept for you, it's time to have the conversation about each of you can support the other when transitioning from one role to another. One idea is using code words to effectively let the other person know how your time away was and what you will need from him/her when you come back together. For example, the word, "tsunami" might let the returning first responder know that the kids have been more active than usual and the house is a mess. The word, "tag" might imply the spouse/partner is ready to "tag out" after a long day at home and needs some quality time alone as soon as possible to reset. Similarly, the word, "time" might be a way the first responder can let the other know it's been a rough day

at work and he/she needs 10-15 minutes to settle in before jumping back to family activities. Or the word, "connect" can be used to let each other know you could benefit from a hug and some support when you see each other.

Take some time to sit down, think and talk about what you both need, and what each of you can do to communicate that to the other.

A phone call or text with these code words can really improve the effectiveness of the transition back home. Write your code words down and keep them close by. Trust us, you'll use them.

③ ISOLATE RESPONSIBLY

Some first responders seem to be especially skilled at withdrawing and isolating from co-workers and family when things aren't going well behind the scenes.

It's important to remember that right now, there are a lot of fears and unanswered questions about what is going on in the world...so don't block each other out.

If you develop symptoms you fear may be related to

COVID-19, it's important you do everything you can to protect your loved ones.

That being said, there are no valid excuses for completely isolating from your family. Make the decision today to hold each other accountable in being present and willing participants in family and relationship matters. Know who can handle what in different circumstances and use that to plan accordingly.

④ SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY HYGIENE

For all of the benefits of the digital world we now live in, there are definitely some disadvantages as well. The ever-present nature of social media can lead to increased anxiety as rumors and outright falsehoods are treated as facts by the Internet community. Friends, family members, and cyberspace acquaintances may "freak out" about the spread of the virus, or financial markets, or latest restaurant closures, and the public opines about how first responders should do their jobs differently/better/faster, etc.

The most effective way to reduce the anxiety caused by all of this is simple: Limit the amount of time you spend on social media; this also includes mindless scrolling.

If social media is your primary method of communication with family, set time limits and make it a daily routine item where you provide a status update and make sure those you love are okay. Once that's been done, put the device down and focus on what is important: your relationship and family.

Technology is also a tempting way to "keep everyone entertained." That said, the research has pretty consistently demonstrated that too much screen time is dangerous for the developing mind. Make sure that everyone at home stays physically active after even short spurts of screen time in order to help keep brains healthy and in good working order. For some fun, low-intensity, brain-stimulating, kinesthetic activities, look up "Brain Gym" activities online.



⑤ PRIORITIZE WHILE YOU SANITIZE

Focusing on sanitizing COVID-19 out of your family's existence can lead to an unhealthy level of rumination: spending too much time focusing on unhelpful thoughts like, "we are all going to get Coronavirus if I don't sanitize the counters every hour" or "I need to find every last roll of toilet paper possible and feed my children blocks of cheese so they don't use it because otherwise we are going to run out."

Be careful about what you obsess over.

Obviously, health and hygiene are a priority. However, remember that these are not the only priorities. Everyone's wellness depends on balance. Hold each other accountable by setting daily tasks, discussing your plans, and sticking together.

⑥ COMMUNICATE FLEXIBLY AND EFFECTIVELY

As each day brings more challenges, more stipulations—or just more of the same—we are also tasked with communicating in a similar fashion. While keeping a routine helps stabilize your family in times of stress and crisis, your routine can adapt, too. Whether on or off the job, how we communicate this routine—including any unexpected changes to the expectations of each other—matters.

Schedule time to talk to each other and set a timer so you can stick to it.

If it's important for you to have an opportunity to really delve into and experience your anxiety, then it may also be helpful to "schedule time to worry," and set a specific time of day (with a reasonable time limit)

where you can do so. But there is a caveat: if you choose this strategy, you must promise yourself and your family that, once time is up, you will return to being productive in the daily routine. Set ground rules for what types of, and in what circumstances, communication is acceptable with each other. Give yourselves permission to take "time outs" from each other if communication is not effective, and to return to the conversation after each of you have had an opportunity to think about and evaluate what is most important. Commit yourselves to trying not to resolve fights over text messages (unless absolutely necessary). As always, reach out to each other and friends for support, and seek out professional help as soon as you recognize you need it.

⑦ SET AND RESPECT BOUNDARIES LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT

Now is not the time to make exceptions to your bottom lines, nor is it time to break good habits. If things get heated, keep taking time-outs to collect yourselves and communicate effectively. If you need a break and can't accommodate any further, listen to that inner voice and take that break. Be courteous yet cautious with your nosy neighbors.

Use "I-statements" to communicate your needs and set expectations in all of your relationships.

Practice those communication skills daily with each other, and define how each of you is able to socially isolate both in and outside of the household when needed. Remember, it's okay to tell someone you can't talk to them about their fears at a given moment and to set a time when it's better for you. It's okay to preserve the sacred self-care practices you have (within reason). And it's okay to tell your family what you need (over and over again, if necessary) and for them to give you the space to pursue it.



8 STILL HAVE EACH OTHER'S "6"

Remember, at the end of the day, you are life partners and that partnership needs to come first. Be a united front against the stressors in your life, rather than letting those tear you apart. Administrative betrayals (e.g., when family plans are ruined because your first responder hears, "you've got to come back to work" or "you can't leave just yet") can feel like a personal betrayal from your partner. Take a moment, hit that inner reset button, and give yourself permission to stop for a second so you can think clearly when these situations arise. Equally, for the first responder, take a moment and ask yourself if someone else can take on the burden of staying later this time so you can keep your commitments to your family.

When this happens (because it very likely will), approach each other wanting to know more, willing to express your concerns, and ultimately, ending this discussion with a commitment to support one another.

This ensures you all know that your "bottom lines" are still upheld, respect is maintained, and communication will be a process rather than an "end-of-discussion" discussion.

9 BE THE ROLE MODEL YOUR KIDS NEED YOU TO BE

Help your kids verbalize the concerns they have about what is going on in the world around them. You've had more trips around the sun which means your brain has had the opportunity to develop the ability to make sense out of chaos. This benefits both you and your kids; be wise in what and how much you discuss, and how you convey your concerns. Validate what your kids are expressing (e.g., "those germs out there are pretty scary to me, too"), while also offering education about the "why" ("that's why I wash my hands every time I come inside from being outside"). The more autonomy your children can gain in this time of uncertainty by following your lead, the more ample the opportunities

will be for them to develop their own personal resiliency. Your kids are watching you to help them understand and interpret everything that is going on. If they see you afraid and unable to cope, they will likely be fearful and have difficulty coping as well.

If they see you respect the circumstances and be proactive in dealing with them, they likely will follow in your footsteps.

Your knowledge and example are even more critical today for your kids' health and emotional well-being than ever before.

10 GOOD, CLEAN FUN

Making the most out of our circumstances is an underlying principle of resiliency.

Facing adversity with an optimistic attitude, a dedication to flexibility, a willingness to participate, and a healthy dose of imagination will help you above and beyond your medicine cabinet and supply of cleaning products.

Your kids are out of school, but they are always learning. This is a chance to learn what happens when

you mix vinegar and baking soda in a paper mâché volcano, or how to turn mate-less socks into hand puppets, or play catch in the backyard, or whatever other fun activities you remember from your youth. If you have to, schedule in the time to be silly. There are rare opportunities where parents and children are permitted the freedom to do exactly what they want together. Give yourself every ounce of permission and encouragement to live out this cherished time with your kids and each other. After all, laughter is the best medicine.

