

To our esteemed VHA Front-line Staff and Volunteers: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges and realities that you are facing are immense and intense. **Many have compared the experiences of front-line health care staff to the experience of war. You are on the front lines, and you are the warriors of this pandemic.** This disaster is unique, in that it is unfolding in your own lives, while you are also trying to care for others. **You are ready for the challenge.** Your Employee Whole Health team is working to support leadership at all levels so they can, in turn, offer you and your colleagues the best support possible. **You are our heroes.** Below are 6 Tough Facts, **adapted from the Battlemind concepts**, to normalize and give credit to the experiences that may be occurring, **as you fight on the front lines of this pandemic.**

THIS IS DIFFICULT.

We know this: The number of those falling ill and/or dying from COVID-19, across the globe, is staggering. By the time this pandemic is over, **many of us will know someone** who was seriously ill or profoundly impacted.



Front-line staff can: Participate in regular **check-ins with your team/service**, engage in **self-care** activities when you are able to, and **talk to your team/close colleagues** about any challenges or problems.

THIS ENVIRONMENT IS DEMANDING.

We know this: This pace and environment will **take a toll on front-line staff** (physical strain, lack of sleep, long shifts, potential difficulty accessing resources). This will test the character of our staff and our leaders.



Front-line staff can: Aim to get **adequate sleep, stay hydrated**, and **utilize wellness resources** available/provided to you, when you are able. Stay informed. Monitor your own physical health (“**apply your oxygen mask first**” applies here – the care we provide to others will suffer if we do not take care of ourselves).

FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY ARE NOT SIGNS OF WEAKNESS.

We know this: **Stress response reactions** to disasters may include anxiety, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, anger, irritability, and avoidance of painful feelings and experiences.



Front-line staff can: Engage intently in **team/service trainings**. Though the intensity is higher, **remember, you have managed difficult situations before, and succeeded - you have the knowledge and skills.** Lean on each other and ask for help. **Trust yourself and your team** and be willing to **talk about your fears with trusted colleagues** – this is critical.

IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO ADMIT NEEDING MORE SUPPORT.

We know this: **Trauma-related responses are common** after large-scale disasters. Sometimes, this can lead to unhealthy coping strategies (increased substance use, change in dietary habits, aggression, etc.).



Front-line staff can: **Stay in touch with your work colleagues and friends** about how you are feeling, and pay attention to your own **coping strategies**, and those of others around you. You may recognize when your colleagues need additional support **before they do**. Encourage each other to seek additional support or mental health support if needed. **EAP services are available to you and your household members, 24/7: 800-222-0364.** Website: www.foh4you.com

FRONT-LINE RESPONSE PLACES A TREMENDOUS STRAIN ON FAMILIES.



We know this: Increasing stress, anxiety, and irritability, and fewer opportunities to stay involved in activities you enjoy, can cause **additional strains on your close relationships**. The stress of having older or vulnerable parents/partners/loved ones who may be at risk for serious COVID-19-related illness, and/or the additional stressor of school and daycare closures, may feel like an insurmountable challenge at home.

Front-line staff can: Remember that these are not normal circumstances, though the challenges and emotions you are experiencing (though maybe not typical for you), are completely normal in light of this crisis. **Practice kindness** towards yourself and others. Find a friend facing similar homelife challenges, and **check-in**.

TEAM COHESION AND STABILITY MAY BE DISRUPTED.



We know this: Your **relationships with your colleagues may be disrupted** by illness, competing home/work demands, emergency leave, family illness, etc. Changes in your own roles, as staff are shifted around to support gaps in services, may also impact the cohesion of your team and your daily routine.

Front-line staff can: Recognize that **your team may lose members** to these various factors and that **disruption is likely**. Identify and train back-up team members in the event you are unexpectedly out. Do your best to **welcome and train new team members**. It may be bumpy, but we have a **collective mission in mind**.

Battlemind concepts adapted from "6 Tough Facts About Combat," Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Land Combat Team; this handout has been adapted from the COVID-19 Employee Support Team Resources Guide, April 2020, VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System.