

PROLONGED OPERATIONS IN PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT DURING INFECTIOUS OUTBREAKS: *Recommendations for Workers and Managers*

Response to infectious outbreaks requires use of personal protective equipment (PPE) by first responders and healthcare workers to reduce their exposure. In some instances the need for working in PPE may extend for entire shifts and continue for weeks.

Promote a culture in which anxiety reactions are expected and managed, where it is “okay to not be okay.”

The following fact sheet summarizes psychological challenges associated with prolonged work in PPE and recommendations for workers and managers to overcome those challenges.

Physiologic Needs of Workers

PPE can limit ability to sustain physiologic needs such as hydration and accelerate fatigue and dehydration through increased sweating.

- Clearly communicate the signs of exhaustion and dehydration so that team members may intervene and protect the safety of themselves and each other.
- Implement a timed schedule in which team members are reminded to properly hydrate.
- Create a buddy system in which team members regularly check on each other to help with monitoring and reminding.

PPE Safety Procedures

With lengthened shifts, exhaustion, and prolonged wearing of PPE, safety procedures when applying and removing PPE may be haphazardly done.

- Highlight and teach the importance of proper application and removal techniques - remember those at home you also want to keep safe and follow protocols.
- Implement a buddy system to ensure use of proper application and removal procedures.

Shortages of PPE

Organizations may encounter shortages of PPE. This can lead to anxiety about work in re-used or reduced equipment.

- Clearly communicate risks associated with re-used or reduced PPE.
- Create a culture in which speaking up about concerns is encouraged and these concerns are recognized.

- Clearly communicate efforts to acquire additional supplies.
- Establish and clearly communicate procedures for sanitizing or decontaminating re-used equipment.

Isolation and Anxiety Reactions

Extended work in PPE can create feelings of isolation and claustrophobia, and can lead to anxiety reactions in some individuals.

- Anxiety symptoms can be eased by a positive teamwork environment.
- Promote a culture in which anxiety reactions are expected and managed, where it is “okay to not be okay.”
- In times of high stress and activity, it may be difficult to take the time to simply breathe. Allow for breaks out of PPE if workers become distressed.
- Implement a buddy system in which personal check-ins are the norm.

Physical and Psychological Distance Between Workers and Patients

PPE causes physical and psychological distance between workers and patients.

- Workers can write their name or tape an informal picture of themselves on the outside of PPE to promote connectedness with patients and other workers.
- It is important for workers to introduce themselves to patients and provide updates and information about their status if possible.