

# Alexandria CERT: Community Emergency Response Team

Police – Fire – Medical Emergency	911
Alexandria Non-Emergency	703-746-4444
Alexandria Animal Control	703-746-4774
National Poison Control Center	800-222-1222
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline	800-273-8255

May - June 2020

## Secondary Effects of Pandemics

Coronavirus disease 2019 – COVID-19 – was designated as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020 and as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The disease symptoms range from asymptomatic and mild to severe. It has strained health care systems and providers and created shortages of medical supplies and equipment.

Prosocial behaviors such as social distancing, hand washing, and wearing face masks are encouraged. Governments imposed stay-at-home orders, travel bans, bans on large gatherings, and closures of schools and businesses to reduce the spread. Infected and exposed individuals are asked to isolate themselves, even from family members. Health departments have pursued contact tracing investigations to locate persons who may have had contact with infected individuals.

**Panic buying and hoarding** have been reactions to concerns about having to self-isolate and uncertainty over how long COVID-19 will affect our lives and society. Panic buying has resulted in real and perceived shortages of face masks, toilet paper, hygiene products such as sanitizers, bottled water, foodstuff, and other goods. Panic buying is a form of herd behavior when people anticipate or experience a disaster. High demand or actual shortages may result in price increases and sometimes price gouging.

**Scams and fraud** proliferate in pandemics and after disasters. Most coronavirus-related scams and frauds are online. Scammers try to steal personal and financial information with messages about economic stimulus funding or by masquerading as charity organizations. They solicit health insurance information to file fraudulent claims. Text and email messages may include malicious links to malware-laden websites or prompt people to download apps that install malware. Some infected messages steal victims' contact lists and then send messages to other victims. Websites with COVID-19 themed names number in the tens of thousands and are used for fraud and misinformation. Fraudulent websites as well as legitimate ones such as Facebook and Amazon market fake testing kits and medical supplies, counterfeit treatments, and non-existent vaccines. The sellers typically fail to deliver product and often steal credit card information.

## Effects, continued

### Scams and Frauds, continued

In-person COVID-19 scam attempts include persons posing as health care workers, fraudulent offerings of treatments or insurance, and solicitation of donations for hospitals or charity organizations, first responders, or COVID-19 affected individuals. Some scams are conducted by phone. A few people have been arrested for claiming to be infected and coughing on others. A Florida car dealership mailed misleading advertisements with a fake check for \$3,000 that could be redeemed at a "relief headquarters" for economic stimulus funding.

**Rumors, misinformation, and disinformation** about COVID-19 are spread by websites and by prominent persons. Websites and social media such as Facebook and Twitter have spread misinformation and disinformation about cures, and conspiracy theories about COVID-19. They have also promoted scapegoating and racism.

Televangelist Jim Bakker and radio host Alex Jones have been issued cease-and-desist orders regarding fake cures. Tampa-based preacher Rodney Howard-Browne mocked COVID-19 fears and defied bans on large gatherings.

## **People's Reactions to Pandemics**

**Disaster Distress Helpline: 800-985-5990**

**or text: TalkWithUs to 66746**

Public health emergencies impact the mental health of most people, causing stress, fear about the current situation, and anxiety with respect to the future. People experience grief and a sense of loss around severe illness, deaths, employment status, and financial security. People may fear becoming sick and dying. They may avoid health care because they fear becoming infected or they don't want to face consequences of being infected, such as hospitalization or self-isolation, being separated from loved ones, or losing their job.

Four types of reactions are:

- Emotional – anxiety, fear, distrust, feeling overwhelmed or helpless, irritability, inability to feel joy
- Cognitive – worry, distracted, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, memory problems, troubling thoughts, self-blame
- Behavioral – fixation on news or hyper-seeking out information, avoiding others, increased relationship conflict, crying easily
- Physical – altered sleeping or eating patterns, fatigue, relying on smoking, drinking, or drugs to cope, headaches or stomach aches especially in children, impaired immune response

Isolation causes loneliness and increases stress reactions, which may persist long after the public health emergency has ended, according to Steve Crimando of the New Jersey Department of Health's Disaster and Terrorism Branch. Also vulnerable are persons with pre-existing mental health conditions such as general anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or schizophrenia. Persons with general anxiety disorders experience many of the symptoms of the four reaction types above. Those with an obsessive-compulsive disorder may escalate hand-washing and cleaning. Disruptions to medications, services, and social support mechanisms negatively affect persons with mental health or substance abuse conditions.

While many people reach out to help neighbors and others or volunteer, increasing levels of fear or dread can lead to distrust of others and an "every man for himself" state of mind. Domestic violence – abuse of partners, children, or the elderly – tends to increase. Factors in domestic violence include the abuser's anger, poor self-esteem, loss of employment, substance abuse, or mental health problems. Compounding the problem is that the victims may be more hidden. For example, children are not in school, where teachers and staff may notice something is wrong and report it.

Financial insecurity arises from loss of employment or reduction in work hours and income. Difficulty in paying bills for housing and medical insurance creates stress. Seniors living on retirement income can also experience financial insecurity as the value of stock investments plummets.

## **Staying Positive in a Pandemic**

There is no one way to cope with or support others during a public health emergency. Stay informed in a responsible way: know the real dangers and get accurate information, but take breaks from news and social media. Put risk in perspective: consider only your personal risk factors; talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. Ask for and accept help from others. Stay connected with family and friends by phone, email, or social media. Take care of yourself: eating, sleeping, exercise, plus relaxing and maintaining a routine to manage stress. Avoid using smoking, alcohol, or drugs to cope.

Take care of and help others. Acknowledge their concerns, but do not provide false assurances. Be empathetic and calm: let them open up and talk through their concerns. For children, use age-appropriate language to help them understand; reassure them; tell them what's going on now and what's expected next. Maintain old routines or create new routines for children and teens. Teach children stress management breathing exercises, especially as fun activities (e.g., blowing bubbles). Understand that young children's behaviors may regress (e.g., start bedwetting) or their development progress may stall.