



What About Us: The First Responder Family And COVID-19

Dr. Cody Todd – PsyD, LCPC, NCC / IFSI Resiliency Project

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Before we jump into this topic, we want to take this opportunity for us to give a big YOU ROCK to the spouses, partners, kids and extended family members of first responders for being who you are. Being a supportive and loving partner/family member and sharing your beloved person with the community they serve is the often-unacknowledged sacrifice you make on the daily! Your sacrifice deserves respect and gratitude as you are wrongly the less celebrated foundation that the fire service sits upon. Your role is crucial; thank you. Ok, back to the scheduled programming...

As the first responder community has taken strides towards mental health and wellness, the first responder family outside the firehouse isn't always as included as they should be in those convos. COVID-19, (not unlike many other risk factors involved with your family member's job) has increasingly brought the streets they face right into your living rooms. With the uncertainty of this current crisis, the unknown and daily revisions create more questions than answers which in turn brings anxiety to both the family and first responder.

As the family of first responders you are aware of the daily risks your first responders face, but the COVID-19 crisis has challenged each of us. We, just like you are worried about our loved ones, however, worrying in silence will not make the others worry less. Share your thoughts fears and hopes with each other as that openness and trust helps to build resilience.

We want to say and do the right thing in support for them, but you may be starting to experience a foreign disparity, caring for them while also having personal fears around COVID-19 exposure. Questions may be in your head like, "if they are exposed, what do we do, what do I do?" "If they need to be quarantined how do we feel about them being in the home?" "What if they get really sick?" "What do I tell my kids?" "How do I explain my own fears to them?" "How do we come up with a plan for our family?" Or countless other questions not listed here. Totally normal AND totally scary.

The first responder's family may, in many ways, be uniquely and previously qualified because the questions posed above, within different contexts of their job, may be things you've thought of or even already discussed with your loved one. But in unprecedented times like these, it naturally brings forth the greater need for conversation and connection between you and your first responder. This is a time of uncertainty that needs a family plan and everyone's honest input. This current need for increased family cohesion could simply be a continuation of your "everyday operations as a family" or an opportunity for development in how you work as a team.

The logistics of what you ultimately decide to do in your family is a very personal decision. Thus, we won't speak to that. But what we will speak to is how you can find ways to strengthen the communication that is already present or support the growth that is possible. Here are three suggestions surrounding communication. We hope you find them helpful.

First, do you know what works best between you and your first responder when it comes to communicating hard topics/feelings? Is it simply to sit together and talk? Is it sharing a feeling or thought and then giving each party time to process to come back and discuss more later? Is it writing to one another via actual pen and paper or via text? Is it making sure to discuss things in person? There are many other things that may work or have worked in the past for you and your first responder; take a moment to note what those were. If you aren't sure what works best, have a conversation about it.



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Although this initial step doesn't get the information of the conversation shared yet, it does frame out the way in which communication happens most effectively so then it can be productive for everyone.

Second, how comfortable are you with sharing your feelings with your first responder? We have often heard many family members say things like, "I try to take care of everything so they don't have to worry," or "I try not to bother them with _____ (fill in the blank)." We know you are trying to care for them by not adding to the plate, but your feelings and thoughts are a valuable part of the equation in your relationship; it is ok to share them. Having someone listen to hear you, but not "fix it" is essential to the family unit and to feeling connected to one another. It allows for you to work as a team rather than one person being the "problem" and one person being the "fixer." On the flip side, we have also heard things along the lines of "they often are angry/tired/overwhelmed/busy and I don't know how to share what I'm feeling without it turning into a disagreement." Often times when a first responder is working a great deal, hasn't slept and/or under increased pressure, etc. their nervous systems aren't working the way they (or you) hope by the time they get home to you. In fact, you most likely have experienced the emotional flooding of your first responder when they walk through the door and you are excited to tell them about your day, but all they want is 45 minutes of peace so they can defuse and transition from their hectic shift. We have heard from spouses, including our own, that you give everything to those you are serving which leaves nothing for me/us. Finding a different time or sharing that there is something you want to talk about once they have taken a nap, eaten a sandwich, etc. just shifts the timing, not the content. This timing change is also another unique "qualification" of the first responder family. We are used to having our timing of holidays, birthdays, vacations, etc. be a little different than everyone else.

Lastly, support, non-judgment and open communication is the bedrock of loving relationships. Whether you are a spouse, a sibling or a parent to your first responder, offering them compassion reciprocates the same given back to you. Sometimes these are areas to be worked on, but that too is ok. It will take both of you taking what sometimes can feel like emotional risks to really share and be heard and hear the other person. Asking for and receiving these types of gestures, behaviors, emotions, conversations, etc. from one another is what makes relationships tick and also can always be improved on (even in the best of relations).

We want to close on that again, your service too is often not appreciated the way it should be. So, thank you. You are supporting an incredible person(s) who does sacrificial things. Some days you just get the leftovers because of their spent nervous systems they used up for their communities. But, even with that in mind, your family and YOU are a valuable and cherished part of the community. Thank you for your sacrifices.



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About the authors:

Dr. Cody Todd

- Dr. Todd has worked as a clinician since 2005 in areas of in-patient, forensics, interdisciplinary medicine, animal assisted therapy and since 2012 in private practice exclusively serving Fire Service, EMS, Military Members and their families. Dr. Todd is the owner of Redtail Counseling and serves as a Subject Matter Expert for the Illinois Fire Service Institute.

Chief James P. Moore

- Chief Moore is a 35-year veteran of the fire service. Chief Moore currently serves as the Assistant Director for the University of Illinois Fire Service Institute. Prior to his regular involvement at IFSI, Chief Moore served as the Fire Rescue Chief / Emergency Manager of the Crystal Lake Fire Rescue Department (IL) for 10 years. Previous to Chief Moore's service in Crystal Lake he served the Naperville Fire Department (IL) for 21 years, where he rose in the ranks from firefighter/paramedic to District Chief.