



# How to Bend Not Break: Building Resilience Through a Pandemic

## (A Guide for Fire Service Personnel)

While widespread access to vaccination brings new hope in a year-long battle against COVID-19, fire service personnel continue to serve and protect their communities on the frontlines. While the risk of exposure to infectious disease and pathogens is nothing new, the stressors personnel have faced during this pandemic are like nothing seen before.

### Key Stressors During a Pandemic

Life on and off the job has fundamentally changed for EMS providers, due to a range of factors:

- **Call Volumes:** While providers in harder-hit communities are at risk for exhaustion and burnout, other communities that remain on lockdown have experienced a significant reduction in volume. For crew members who prefer to stay busy on shift, more downtime can exacerbate existing tension and stress.
- **Misinformation:** Despite 24/7 access to news, finding accurate and trustworthy information can be a challenge. Misinformation at the local or national level can make it harder for personnel to do their job, especially during a global pandemic.
- **Contamination Fears:** Despite major strides in the vaccination effort, the risk of contaminating family and fellow co-workers remains a fear for many EMS providers. Families with a parent or child under quarantine experience major disruption in their family's daily routine, childcare and living situations.
- **Economic Concerns:** The financial impact of COVID-19 over the last year has hit certain communities harder than others. The possibility of cutbacks, pay freezes and furloughs remains a legitimate concern for many first responder families.
- **Changing Response Protocols:** Throughout the last year, the overwhelming strain on the healthcare system due to COVID-19 has led to unprecedented changes in emergency response protocol. Such changes may have unintended emotional consequences on personnel who took an oath to save lives.
- **Homelife Stress:** EMS providers with a spouse or children at home may have additional stressors to face as they attempt to homeschool children, adjust to their spouse's telework schedule or simply spending much more time together.
- **Vaccine Hesitancy:** While safe and effective COVID-19 vaccinations are becoming available for young children — fear, misinformation and hesitancy to get vaccinated remain high in many communities. The risk of new COVID-19 strains remains a serious public health threat.

### What Does It Mean to Be Resilient?

We each have our own way of responding to life's challenges. Resilience is often thought of as the ability to bounce back from life's adversities or to withstand loss or change without losing oneself. Given the high rate of occupational trauma, the inherent stress of the job and the toll on family life, we know that fire and EMS personnel are an incredibly resilient population.



However, during a pandemic even the most seasoned crew members may begin to crumble under stress, while others seem to thrive. What makes someone resilient in the face of adversity, severe stress or trauma? Decades of research have identified several key protective factors that predict human resilience. Resilient individuals:

1. Choose to maintain an optimistic outlook
2. Face fear, rather than avoid it
3. Seek and accept social support
4. Create meaning and opportunity from adversity
5. Prioritize physical fitness and strength

Other personal factors that researchers have found to predict human resilience include having a clear moral compass, relying on spirituality or a higher power, having defined role models in life and the ability to maintain flexible thinking (Southwick and Charney, 2018). If you're interested in assessing your current level of resilience, see the [Brief Resilience Scale \(BSI\)](#), an informal assessment tool designed to measure one's ability to bounce back from stress.

## Steps to Build Resilience During COVID-19

Another important aspect of resilience is the ability to accept what's out of our control while refocusing energy on what we can control. Consider how this quality directly applies to your vital role as a healthcare provider. At a minimum, this means vigilantly following the infection control protocols established by your department, while observing common sense precautions to prevent germ transmission at home and in public. Fire and EMS personnel are also strongly encouraged to review the latest IAFF guidelines on [PPE and Decontamination During COVID-19](#).

Beyond physically protecting yourself from virus spread, there are plenty of concrete actions you can take today to protect your emotional well-being and build resilience, both on and off the job. Consider these self-care strategies for you and other crew members:

- **Hunt for something good.** When communities are overwhelmed by widespread illness and economic stress, it's easy to get weighed down. To keep things in perspective, force yourself to find something good each day. This could be noticing a crew member's job well done, enjoying extra quality time with family or simply reflecting on the fact that you are healthy. Tell someone about the good.
- **Limit exposure to news and social media.** If you're interested in reducing daily stress and creating a more optimistic outlook, limit the number of times per day you check the news or social media. The 24/7 media cycle is one of the biggest modern-day triggers for anxiety and rumination. It's also completely within our control to turn it off.
- **Use video chat to stay connected.** It's simple, but true. Social distance doesn't mean social isolation. Find a way to stay connected to people in your normal routine who are supportive. Just a few minutes a day can go a long way towards reducing feelings of isolation.
- **Maintain personal boundaries.** Although we remain physically separated, in many ways our world has never been more connected. In the age of social media, texting and video chats, we are constantly accessible. If constant connection leaves you feeling drained or stressed, give yourself permission to unplug on some days.
- **Get moving.** Strive for 20-30 minutes of physical activity every day. Whether it's an app-based exercise or walking around your neighborhood while maintaining social distance, movement is absolutely essential. Exercise helps boost mood, improves concentration and strengthens the immune system.
- **Use telemental health services as needed.** If you are struggling with behavioral health problems, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD or grief, seeking mental health services has never been easier or more private. [Telemental health](#) services are mental health services provided over the phone, a mobile app or an interactive website. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, most commercial insurance plans now cover these services.



- **Find purpose in a challenge.** Try looking at a problem at work or home from a different lens. For example, if your crew is completely overwhelmed, imagine how manageable the job will seem when call volumes stabilize. If your department is lacking good leadership, now is the time to let your leadership qualities shine. If cancelled social and sporting events have left you feeling restless, consider what neglected hobby you can reconnect to at home.

## The IAFF Is Here for You

Whatever your approach is to self-care, know that you are not alone. You are connected to a brotherhood and sisterhood that care deeply for your emotional and physical health. If you're interested in learning practical skills to build resiliency on and off the job, see the [IAFF Resiliency Training](#) now available as a [fully virtual training](#).

Visit [www.iaff.org/behavioral-health](http://www.iaff.org/behavioral-health) to learn more about:

- Emerging COVID-19 behavioral health issues for fire service personnel
- IAFF online recovery meetings for fire/EMS personnel in recovery from addiction
- Free telemental health services for U.S. fire/EMS personnel
- The IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery

**For more important information on COVID-19, visit [www.iaff.org/coronavirus](http://www.iaff.org/coronavirus).**