PAR360

For Family Members

The life of a first responder is physically taxing. Physiologically, exposure to danger puts the brain on autopilot, raises blood pressure, and suppresses the digestive system. This is an abnormal state, built for the quick bursts needed to make a successful fight or flight, and it's potentially harmful over sustained periods. So, when the danger passes and the responder returns home, the body must stabilize. This necessary biological process can take a toll emotionally, physically, and spiritually – to both the individual and their loved ones.

Sleep is also a vital component to maintaining good emotional and physical health. A body primed to respond, waiting for the tones to drop, can translate into unhealthy sleep patterns, light sleeping, jumpiness, exhaustion – contributing to grumpiness or other mental health symptoms.

Dealing with Trauma Exposure

People who deal with trauma (and PTSD) often have trouble with their close family relationships or friendships. Although not all first responders develop PTSD, the effects of the job do take an emotional toll frequently experienced as anger or irritability, emotional withdrawal, avoidance, substance abuse and relationship issues. The symptoms of PTSD can cause problems with trust, closeness, communication, and problem solving which, in turn, may impact the way family members respond to that person. They may have less interest in social or sexual activities. Because survivors feel irritable, on guard, jumpy, worried, or nervous, they may not be able to relax or be intimate. They may also feel an increased need to protect their loved ones. They may come across as tense or demanding. Living with someone who is easily startled, has nightmares, and often avoids social situations can take a toll on the most caring family. The effects of trauma can make somebody hard to be with.

Loved Ones Might See

- Fight or Flight after effects
- At work they're alive, alert, energetic, involved.
- After work they're
- Exhausted
- Detached
- Isolated
- Apathetic
- Emotionally distant
- Less interest in social or sexual activities
- Diminished family involvement

- Increased need to protect their loved ones
- Quiet, grumpy, or short tempered
- Don't want to talk about bad calls/memories (out of a desire to protect you)
- Difficulty focusing on their partner.
- Hard to listen carefully
- Hard making decisions together
- Because they may feel irritable, jumpy, on guard, or angry
- Can come across as demanding or tense
- Avoid closeness
- Push people away
- Often increased yelling and fighting
- Using substances in attempt to cope
- Sleep problems may disrupt sleep for both people

Family Members Might Experience

- Family members may feel hurt, cut off, or down
- Feel lonely
- May become angry or distant
- Feel pressured, tense and controlled
- Like they're walking on eggshells
- Feeling that they have let their partner down or have done something to upset them

What you can do

- Understand the symptoms
- Tell your loved one you want to listen and that you also understand if they don't feel like talking
- Set up a regular time/routine to talk with your partner about incidents. This shows your interest in them and their job.
    - This should allow you to talk about a particular incident without trauma details, providing you an understanding of the general situation and what they might be feeling about it.
- Take care of yourself
- Get support if you need it
- Some first responders need a buffer zone, or some downtime to mentally transition to the home environment
- Encourage good coping strategies like exercise, healthy sleep, good nutrition, time with hobbies