



A Hughes Center Conversation: Coronavirus Pandemic Poses Risks to Mental Health

Galloway, N.J. - First responders, medical personnel and even ordinary people sheltering at home must recognize the stress they are experiencing during the coronavirus crisis and take steps to cope with it.

Atlantic County Sheriff Eric Scheffler discussed the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health issues related to the pandemic in a video-recorded conversation sponsored by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University and hosted by Executive Director John Froomjian.

The sheriff was formerly part of a working group that adapted an FBI National Academy program to bolster resiliency while working with trauma for use by New Jersey law enforcement. He is also a member of the Hughes Center Steering Committee.

Dealing with the pandemic is causing anxiety and stress at all levels of society whether someone is working in an emergency room or staying under lockdown in fear of contracting the virus.

Scheffler said strategies used by New Jersey law enforcement can help everyone deal with the long-term stress. A retired lieutenant from the Atlantic City police force, Scheffler is an advocate of “resiliency” programs that provide positive coping skills in the face of negative incidents.

Most people are currently working or living with operational stress, not knowing how the crisis will turn out, how long it will last, whether they will contract the virus or if they may bring it home and infect their family.

“As humans, we want to be able to predict what’s next, to have that safety net of reassurance that everything is going to be all right,” Scheffler said. “This is a prolonged incident of stress that we’re all being affected by. We don’t have the known, and we can’t control the day-to-day happenings. So this affects all of us negatively.”

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can result from any type of trauma or critical incident. The person doesn’t have to experience the trauma directly but can simply be a witness to it. Typically people associate PTSD with returning war veterans. But anyone can have it and experience its symptoms: reliving the trauma over and over, sleeplessness, anxiety, or depression.

Among those potentially at risk are EMTs dealing with coronavirus victims and medical staff treating patients in overwhelmed hospitals described in published reports as “war zones.” These front-line responders go home physically and mentally exhausted and may return to the coronavirus battle with just enough sleep to go on.

“They are not getting a break from the hyper-vigilance,” Scheffler said. “You come home exhausted. You can’t functionally get off the couch. ... That’s mental stress that’s the beginning of depression.” he said.

He said workers need to take care of themselves.

“Those are the times that you have to say, ‘Okay, I know I’m physically and mentally exhausted. I need to reset myself. I need to go work out. I need to go for a walk. I need to read a book. I need to self-care.’ ”

He said the goal is to avoid negative coping mechanisms, such as alcohol or drug abuse. The better choice is to engage in activities involving capacities in the areas of mental (reading, conversation), physical (working out, walking), spiritual (meditation, religion) and social (spending time with family, online meetings with friends).

“What everyone should know first and foremost is that (feeling) the stress of this pandemic is normal. It’s natural. We all have it regardless of who you are,” Scheffler said. “Don’t think you’re weak. This is not a sign of weakness.

“You want to go back to the things that have helped in the past to reset yourself during whatever those stressful times may have been. And if you can’t reset yourself and you’re spiraling, then one of the bravest things you can do is to reach out for a professional to help you get through this,” he said, adding that some therapists have begun counseling by phone during the pandemic.

To view a video of the full conversation between Froomjian and Scheffler or to find resources on dealing with operational stress or PTSD, visit the Hughes Center website (www.hstockton.edu/hughes-center/coronavirus-pandemic-poses-risks-to-mental-health).

About the Hughes Center

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and promotes the civic life of New Jersey through engagement, education and research. The center is named for the late William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, Ambassador to Panama and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Stockton. The Hughes Center can be found on [YouTube](#), and can be followed on Facebook [@StocktonHughesCenter](#), Twitter [@hughescenter](#) and Instagram [@ stockton_hughes_center](#).