

# Professional Education Series

The Recovery Village and Advanced Recovery Systems





## Presentation Topic:

# Critical Events and Stress Management

Developing skills that will sustain your mental health  
and prioritize wellbeing in difficult times.

## Speaker:

Dorinda Burnham, MS LMHC CCTP



# About the Speaker:

## Dorinda Burnham

MS | LMHC | CCTP



Dorinda Burnham is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor in private practice at Changing Perspectives Counseling Group for individual, couples, and group therapy. Dorinda is an IATP Certified Clinical Trauma Professional and Specialist in Critical Incident Stress Management and Incident Debriefing.

Dorinda is experienced in instruction and education for mental health wellness, communication strategies, self-care, substance abuse treatment, as well as trauma response and recovery. She holds a Master's of Science degree in Mental Health Counseling from Nova Southeastern University.

Dorinda credits her previous career in public safety for pushing her toward pursuing studies in fields of trauma, resiliency, and wellness. Dorinda works with clients to embrace change and feel empowered in pursuit of their best self.

# Why Do Stressful Events Evoke Panic?

- We feel most secure when things feel understood and controlled.
- We adapt better to situations that we have previously experienced first-hand and been resilient to.
- We create an image of safety in our minds which is altered daily by information we take in.
- Anxiety, stress, and panic are created when we receive signals or information that do not support these principles.



# A Word About Mirror Neurons...

Our brain cells mimic the actions or noticeable emotions of others.

They help us to form bonds, learn from each other, and create empathy but can be detrimental when stress is prevalent.

Stress is passed on like a contagion. It suppresses the immune system and can overtake the part of our brain that rationalizes our thoughts.

When we observe reactions of others that evoke a sense of panic, our stress and anxiety increases, and we may feel compelled to mimic those behaviors.

# Where We Get Our Information From is Important!



Many people rely on media outlets to receive pertinent information in a critical situation. News, Online publications, and journalism strive to provide information fast but often miss the mark on accuracy.



We have a virtual world of connection we look to in discussing current issues. Social media is known to exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and depression in stressful times.



We use our immediate support system to keep us updated. Worried family members, coworkers, and friends can create a cycle of negativity and increase levels of anxiety despite the best intentions by those close to us.

While we have plenty of resources available, we need to understand risks associated with them. The key is to become informed instead of being overwhelmed.

# Being Cautious vs. Overreacting

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While it is important to be informed, too much information can become conflicting, increase anxiety, and affect our normal coping routines. Seek information based on your situation and that is relevant to your necessary routine.

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Streamline the information that comes in and discussions you have about the event. Minimizing exposure to news, social media, and conversations about the incident with your social support system can help.

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Choose sources and people that you most trust. Set time limitations on watching the news, stay away from social media temporarily, and set boundaries on conversations you engage in with others. Know when to walk away or distance yourself from a person or resource that feels overwhelming to you. It is okay to set boundaries when we are stressed.

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It is okay to have some uncertainty. Not having immediate information in many cases is safe. While there are some events that can lead to an immediate decision needed, we can adapt to a life where we know enough to prepare instead of panic.

# Plan Ahead to Reduce Stress

Whether facing a national threat, natural disaster, global pandemic, or economic crisis, making a contingency plan can help.

Talk with family and friends that you will need assistance from or need to help them during a critical time.

Be flexible in your planning. Even best plans can change due to unforeseen issues that come up. Remember, it is okay to have some uncertainty. Things outside of your control require a bit of acceptance through the process.

Ask questions from sources that have previously experienced a similar event.

Seek assistance with mental health issues ahead of time to strengthen coping skills and talk through issues that can be managed before an event impacts you.

## Preparation reduces panic!

When we feel that we have a plan in place and have communicated our needs ahead of time, we are better able to make decisions when given a stressful situation.



# Planning for Isolation or Relocation

Talk with family members involved. Whether you need to stay in place and prepare, quarantine or evacuate, communication is key. Consider the needs of each family member, including pets.

Make a schedule for yourself and your family. We thrive when we have structure. It provides comfort and eases the unknown factors during a stressful time to have a routine to follow.

For young children, set aside time for play. Reduce use of phones and electronic distractions. Crafting, puzzles, and books can be shared during time with the family to encourage positive interaction and bonding.

It is an okay response to say "I don't know" when other family members are seeking answers. Whether you have experienced a similar event previously or not, it is not up to you to fix every issue that arises. Be kind to yourself and stick to factual conversations.

Know what local, state, or federal resources are available. In times of crisis events, there are several organizations available for public resources. This may require planning ahead or contacting a local government entity or website for further information.

# Coping Skills for Stress

## Boundaries, Boundaries, Boundaries!

- Allow yourself to set restrictions on who you interact with about issues that cause you stress. Taking space and time to yourself is much needed when you feel overwhelmed!

## Minimize exposure

- Turn off the news, distance yourself from social media, disengage in work or public conversations that trigger stress/anxiety. Creating your own schedule to take in information makes it manageable and decreases the feelings that we have to know every detail. Remember: Uncertainty is OKAY!

## That four-letter word we hate...MOVE (as in exercise\*)

- Exercise is a great way to manage stress, anxiety, and depression. It boosts healthy hormones in our brain and can regulate moods. By taking time to exercise daily you are improving your health and increasing motivation.

## Stick to a healthy diet

- Proper nutrition is imperative in times of stress. When we take care of our physical needs, our mental health benefits from it. Stay away from foods that are heavy in fats and sugars that can cause lethargy. Reduce or abstain from alcohol or other substances that can disrupt sleep, numb our feelings, and ultimately increase anxiety.

## Get Your Sleep!

- It is important to create a sleep hygiene plan in times of stress. Going to bed and getting up at the same time, planning quiet and relaxing activities during periods of restlessness, and using tools such as breathing, meditation, and mindfulness practices can help.

# Mindfulness and Stress Reduction

Doing things daily to ground yourself and stay present can calm your anxious brain.

## Name Your Fears

- What is it that you worry will happen?
- Organize a list of your fears and assign them a place in order of what you can control and what is unknown.
- Consider your personal risks and how to best safely prepare for you or your family.
- Consider likeliness of your fears and use a perspectives exercise to dismiss unrealistic thoughts.

## Write it down

- Journaling, Creative writing, Free Association Scripting, and Drawing can help to organize thoughts.
- Making lists of stressors that are playing through your mind will help to organize them.
- Slow down overthinking by beginning to process your thoughts through writing and reflection.
- Share your writings with a trusted person who will help you talk through your thoughts.

## Meditation and Guided Imagery

- These mindfulness tools can help to center, keep you in the present moment, and reduce catastrophizing thoughts.
- They help to slow down thoughts and redirect your focus to calm and relax.
- There are apps, online videos, and scripts that are available at no cost to you.
- Even a 10-minute meditation upon waking or before bedtime can be a helpful part to sleep hygiene practices.

## Yoga, Stretching, and Breathwork

- Simple breathing exercises, stretching, and many yoga poses can help to relax tension in your body created by stress.
- When we can reduce our heart rate and slow the impact of stress on our body, we begin to feel more mentally at ease as well.
- Focusing on breath creates a way to separate our rational thoughts from cognitive distortions.

## Grounding Techniques

- Noticing your 5 senses, feeling the space around your physical body, or focusing on a object as an attempt to distract your thoughts to a present experience can reduce stress and anxiety.
- It creates a practice of slowing thoughts and allowing you to feel more in control of your emotions.
- Notice your worst -case scenario thinking and counteract it with best-case images that neutralize negativity.

When your needs are met, you can better help others. Identify what you need to support you in a difficult time.

Ask for help! If you are struggling with anxiety, stress, or overwhelming thoughts reach out to available support.

Therapy is available in online telehealth platforms. During a crisis event there are many resources that work to provide affordable healthcare to manage stress.

# Above All Else, Take Care of Yourself

**THANK YOU**

