

Stress Injury Prevention & Mitigation

The Stress Continuum

(adapted from USMC Combat Operational Stress Continuum)

The stress continuum has four zones: Ready, Reacting, Injured, and Ill. Ready, or the Green Zone, is where most of us are most of the time; however, when a stressor enters the picture, we can slide into “reacting” aka the Yellow Zone. The amount of time someone spends in each zone varies and it is possible to experience “moments” or “a day” in different zones.

The Stress Continuum Model is not meant to be a diagnostic tool; instead, it gives us a common language to talk about levels of stress. Rather than going into details, you can say “I am in the Yellow Zone” or “I think I might be in the Orange Zone.” By changing the way we think and talk about the presence of stress and stress injuries in the lives of first responders, we can promote a culture of openness and healing.

Ready - The Green Zone

Signs/symptoms of someone in the Green Zone:

- A. Remaining calm and steady
- B. Being confident in oneself and others
- C. Getting the job done
- D. Remaining in control
- E. Possessing sound mind, body, spirit, and social fitness
- F. Behaving ethically and morally
- G. Retaining a sense of humor
- H. Being at peace with oneself

The Green Zone is not simply a lack of stressors; rather, responders adapt to cope with stressors effectively and continue to function well. The Green Zone is where we want to be most of the time; however, when a stressor enters the picture, we can slide into the Yellow Zone.

Reacting - The Yellow Zone

The Yellow Zone is always temporary, common, and reversible. There is some anxiety, irritability, and behavior change, but responders will go back to Green on their own after the stress is removed. Every responder goes in and out of the Yellow Zone.

Signs/symptoms of stress reaction in the Yellow Zone:

- A. Cutting corners on the job
- B. Being short-tempered, irritable, or grouchy
- C. Having trouble falling asleep
- D. Eating too much or too little
- E. Losing some interest, energy, or enthusiasm
- F. Not enjoying usual activities
- G. Keeping to oneself
- H. Being overly loud or hyperactive
- I. Feeling worried, anxious, or fearful
- J. Feeling sad or angry
- K. Being negative or pessimistic
- L. Diminished mental focus

If a responder is in the Yellow Zone, they are reacting to temporary or mild stress and show temporary signs of stress that go away on their own. Even though Yellow Zone stress reactions are temporary, you can help support other responders experiencing temporary stress manage their stress to return to the Green Zone. If you are experiencing Yellow Zone stress reactions, take care of your physical needs such as nutrition, hydration, and getting enough sleep, and reach out to a colleague or your social support systems to help you get through it.

Injured - The Orange Zone

Responders in the Orange Zone might show a lasting change in behavior or personality caused by more severe and persistent forms of distress or loss of function. Because Orange Zone stress injuries may not resolve on their own and may last for many years, responders may need to engage resources and assist other responders in the Orange Zone. In some cases, Orange Zone stress injuries may get worse and go into the Red Zone.

Signs of stress injury in the Orange Zone:

- A. Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- B. Having recurrent, vivid nightmares

- C. Being unable to enjoy usually pleasurable activities
- D. Losing the ability to remember or think rationally and clearly
- E. Feeling persistent, intense guilt or shame
- F. Feeling unusually remorseless or emotionally cold
- G. Experiencing attacks of panic or blind rage

All these symptoms are in relation to a responder's normal demeanor and activities, making it vital to know your colleagues and look for changes in their behavior. It is important to know that responders can recover from stress-related issues with the proper support. Utilize resources such as chaplains, counselors (often available through the Employee Assistance Program at your workplace), and other professionals to facilitate recovery from Orange Zone stress injuries.

III - The Red Zone

Responders in the Red Zone experience severe distress or some loss of function that has gotten bad enough or persisted long enough to be diagnosable. Its symptoms, if unmanaged, may significantly impact a responder's career and family. This responder may have Post-Traumatic Stress, anxiety, or depression. Only a qualified medical professional can diagnose someone in the Red Zone. You CAN help identify symptoms associated with the Red Zone. If you think a responder is in the Red Zone, help them get assistance.

Signs of stress illness in the Red Zone:

- A. Experiencing attacks of panic or blind rage
- B. Long-lasting and disabling distress or impairment of normal functioning
- C. Symptoms that worsen over time rather than improve
- D. Problems and issues that return after improving or seeming to resolve
- E. Impairment that does not significantly improve within several weeks

Practice Resilience: Staying in the Green

Being resilient means that you are able to “bounce back” from a traumatic event, and research shows that being mentally prepared, developing good practices, and taking care of yourself will help you recover more rapidly from a stressful event. Resilience is a skill that anyone can develop and improve, and there is even evidence that people can develop psychological resistance (i.e. an immunity) to traumatic stress (see Five Factors Resilient People Possess).

To practice resilience, start by keeping your body at peak performance. This means eating well, getting enough sleep, and staying physically active. Build and maintain social connections with family, friends, and the community – these people will provide support when you need it most. Look internally to nurture your inner source of energy and sense of purpose, and work to develop a clear, focused mind by learning new things, practicing problem-solving, or meditating. Resilience is also improved by training, practice, and mental preparation for an event. Imagining, or better yet practicing, a successful response to a worst-case scenario will help you better respond and recover.

Five Factors Resilient People Possess

(adapted from Psychological Body Armor by Dr. George Everly, 2018)

1. **Active Optimism:** choosing to believe that things will turn out well and that you have the ability to make them turn out well.
2. **Decisiveness:** being able to make decisions, especially difficult ones.
3. A Clear **Moral Compass:** knowing what it means to be honest and to act with integrity and being able to put your beliefs into action.
4. **Tenacity:** being able to keep going, even to the point of failure, and then being able to define that failure as a lesson or a stepping stone.
5. **Interpersonal Support:** connecting with others and feeling like part of a family, social group, or team.