



# Take care for yourself

## Some medical advice about how law enforcement officers can better manage their health

■ BY MICHELE C. HOLLOW

It's common for law enforcement officers to worry about what they can't see. Instincts kick in, and you check behind a door or open a closet. Not dismissing the invisible makes you good at your job.

When it comes to their health, however, first responders often dismiss subtle clues. They ignore that they are having difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, feelings of anxiety, irritability and moodiness. Add in a pandemic, and the stress ratchets up.

"It's the invisible mental worries that add to the stress of your job," emphasizes Integrity Health Chief Physician Executive Dr. Joseph Calabro.

Everyone's stressed, and that stress is magnified due to COVID-19. Many unknowns from the pandemic stoke those fears. The uncertainty of not knowing if the person you're in contact with is asymptomatic, feeling isolated, maintaining social distancing, hearing the anti-police rhetoric from elected officials and through the media, worrying about getting sick or passing the virus onto family members, exhaustion from working overtime because coworkers are in quarantine or sick with the virus — it's overwhelming.

"First responders' situations differ from the ordinary average Joe on the street," says Dr. Jay Kuris, consulting psychiatrist at Integrity Health. "Often it's the family members who first see that something is wrong. It's often hard for first responders to acknowledge a problem, and when they do, it's hard for them to seek help."

Heading into a new year as challenging as the past one, law enforcement officers must make their physical and mental health and wellness a priority. And that starts now.

"The first step is talking about our emotions," Kuris continues. "Not dealing with them leads to increased stress, which can worsen chronic physical and mental health conditions."

### Treating the visible and the invisible

When it comes to your health, you know when you're physically ill. The telltale signs of the flu or a cut are clearly visible. Seeking treatment for a physical illness is routine.

"We should follow the same path when we experience chronic stress," asserts Doug Forrester, chairman of Integrity Health. "We

schedule annual wellness visits to a primary care doctor. We understand that finding an illness in its early stage makes the treatment more successful. The same should be said of mental illness. At Integrity Health, every wellness visit includes an option of behavioral services."

Those behavioral services can include general conversations with a medical professional asking about your overall well-being. "We take an integrative approach," Forrester says.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, long-term stress can cause high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, depression, substance abuse and other physical and mental health illnesses.

### Integral services for first responders

Integrity Health's First Responders Partnership Health Center (FRPHC) will open this spring in Hamilton. This one-stop health care facility solely for first responders and their families offers visits with primary care physicians, physical therapists and health care workers who specialize in pain management, behavioral health, urgent care and a broad range of other specialties. A pharmacy will also be on the premises. There are no co-pays for those covered by the State Health Benefits Plan.

Members can sign up for same-day appointments. The First Responders Partnership Health Center will be open seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Integrity Health has other health care facilities in New Jersey for its members. Plans for additional centers include one in Bergen County, one in Essex County and one in Camden County. Forrester understands that it's a major goal during normal times and a Herculean one in the current environment to find reliable, high-quality primary care.

A survey by the Physicians Foundation, a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization that educates physicians on leadership skills, estimated that 8 percent of all physician practices nationally (that's around 16,000 practices) have closed due to the pandemic.

"The situation facing front-line physicians is dire," wrote three physician associations that represent more than 260,000 doctors. In

their letter to Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex M. Azar II, which they sent at the end of April, they wrote, “Obstetrician-gynecologists, pediatricians and family physicians are facing dramatic financial challenges leading to substantial layoffs and even practice closures.”

### Making it work

“In this environment, we need the First Responders Partnership Health Center for our first responders,” Forrester says. “This is an important time to integrate mental health services with primary care.”

Getting first responders the primary care they need — both physically and emotionally — is the goal.

“Having easy behavioral health access within a primary care setting should be standard operating procedure,” says Richard Wohl, MSW, MBA, an Integrity Health consultant who previously served as president of Princeton House Behavioral Health. “It’s OK to be hurting. The job of a first responder can be daunting, and it’s especially daunting to admit needing help. It’s brave to come forward.”

Wohl described the center as a much-needed antidote to the pandemic.

“This one-stop shop also includes telemedicine,” he says, “which has grown due to the coronavirus. I think telemedicine will only increase over time, because our members like the convenience and the privacy. First responders are private people. Having online services, especially in the mental health field, allows people to open up from the comfort of their home.”

### Focusing on self-care

You’ve heard the expression “You are what you eat.” Important steps toward accounting for your health include introspection and recognition.

“When we tell first responders to take care of themselves, that includes eating a healthy diet and finding time to exercise,” Calabro says. “Getting rest is also essential. So many first responders put their work first and their health second. Over the long haul, feeling exhausted takes its toll. That’s why it’s important to take breaks — even short ones.”

Scheduling short periods of rest boosts physical and mental health. “I’m thinking about the old Army slogan, ‘Be the Best You Can Be,’” says Kuris. “The way to be your best self and to serve others is to take care of yourself. That’s where you have to start. That means talking to a professional therapist before the pressure overwhelms you. When you’re not feeling right, that’s the time to get help.”

Integrity Health’s motto is “Lower costs through better health.” The idea is to make services readily available and easy to access, and place a focus on primary care, which includes mental health.

“We go to the doctor for annual wellness visits when we’re well,” Forrester says. “Catching a major illness early is cost-effective.”

Forrester has also talked with officials in Governor Phil Murphy’s office about the COVID-19 vaccine distribution for first responders.

“We’re waiting on shipment of the vaccines and have everything on hand — the administrators, medical personnel and equipment — to start vaccinating first responders,” he notes.

Patient satisfaction reports from other Integrity Partnership Health Centers are extremely favorable. Forrester explains this by highlighting the unique nature of Partnership Health Centers: same-day appointments, one-stop shopping for multiple services (doctor, pharmacist, behavioral health therapist, lab and X-ray, physical therapist/chiropractor) and first-responder friendly trained staff. “We’re confident that first responders will quickly find FRPHC to be their healthcare home base.”

“We expect first responders to take advantage of all it has to offer,” he says. “Our first responders pride themselves on being invulnerable. Here at Integrity Health, we begin by winning their confidence that we are there for them, to keep them — as well as their loved ones — healthy for work and play. We have an unparalleled track record in this regard and look forward to welcoming soon, first responders to the facility dedicated to them.”



## When you need some relief from work, Workit

Seriously. How can one be grateful during a pandemic?

“It’s a challenge we’re coping with,” confides Lisa McLaughlin, co-founder and co-CEO at Workit Health, an addiction health-care company that provides online and in-person care through web and native applications.

Indeed, the coming year will make staying healthy even more challenging. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that essential workers, adults and young adults are experiencing disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance use and elevated suicidal ideation due to the pandemic.

Fortunately, there’s help.

“We’ve had an almost 40 percent increase of our members connecting socially online,” McLaughlin says.

Workit Health’s app gives first responders the privacy they require to receive the type of mental health care that can help them through these tumultuous times.

“They can connect instantly with a social worker if they need to talk,” McLaughlin says. “They can text and take online workshops or participate in online social groups. Privacy is emphasized, and being online doesn’t mean you have to be seen.”

For law enforcement officers who might need to reach out at any time, Workit Health is a place to turn for the response they are looking for.

“Support is so valuable, especially at this time,” McLaughlin adds. “And the social aspect is especially important because so many of us are isolated due to the pandemic. The workshops are fun and members can join at their convenience, night or day.”

Workshops include everything from learning how to make nonalcoholic mocktails to yoga classes to meditation and much more.

“The key is finding something you enjoy and making time for it,” McLaughlin details. “It could be meditation or kickboxing. In order to stick with it, it must be something you enjoy. Plus, it’s positive because of the social aspect that counters the loneliness.”

Other ways McLaughlin suggests to boost morale include:

- Taking walks
- Going for a run or jog
- Taking a cooking class
- Listening to music
- Exercising
- Eating well
- Getting a good night’s sleep

McLaughlin emphasized the need for sleep. “It’s self-care,” she says, “and self-care also involves taking breaks.”

One of Workit Health’s most popular feel-good apps is the positive affirmations. The app sends texts to members’ phones, asking, “What are you grateful for today?”

“The simple act of focusing on something we’re grateful for encourages a positive mindset,” McLaughlin says. “Science shows self-affirmations lift our spirits.”