

Summary Points

What is meant by the term avoidance?

- ❖ Some forms of avoidant coping include suppressing emotional responses; avoiding people, places, and memories that may cause distress; or denying one's feelings.
- ❖ This is not to say that if someone seems fine after experiencing a distressing event that they must be engaging in avoidance coping because it is entirely possible that the person has developed healthy coping strategies to manage stress.

When avoidance becomes a problem

- Avoidant coping is necessary for first responders – without the ability to suppress emotional reactions, crisis responders would not be able to perform effectively.
- When avoidant coping becomes someone's primary or only means of coping, it can start to make it difficult to recognize even positive emotions.
- Reliance on avoidance coping to deal with critical incidents also prevents processing of the event, which can lead to and/or prolong symptoms of PTSD and depression.

The Critical Role of Peer Support

- Peer support plays an important role in de-stigmatizing psychological struggles and encouraging the use of formal intervention when needed.
- Helping peers acknowledge when they are struggling can go a long way in reducing reliance on avoidance coping because peers learn that they can talk about upsetting events without falling apart.
- Research shows that crisis responders who endorse more organizational social support have better mental health, higher job satisfaction, and lower job turnover intention.
- This document is an excellent resource for agencies interested in starting a robust peer support program: <https://www.nena.org/page/PeerSupport>

Tips to Stay Engaged and Re-Engage

- ✓ It is easy to allow relationships outside of crisis responding to drift due to the scheduling demands and conflicts inherent in the field. However, it is critical to stay engaged in relationships and activities outside of crisis responding to retain perspective.
- ✓ Engagement in small goals each day (e.g., start by just checking out gym options then graduate to driving to the building then to walking into the building) can build a sense of agency and success for individuals experiencing physical and psychological depletion.
- ✓ Talk. That may seem simple, but just talking about anything can activate areas of the brain that become underactive when experiencing conditions such as depression.
- ✓ If you or someone else starts to show strong avoidance for people, places, things or memories that are reminders of an upsetting event, it may be time to reach out to a peer or mental health provider. Some immediate avoidance is normal, but if it persists past a month, it can lead to longer-term suffering.