

Understanding Hypervigilance And Managing Anxiety During an Ebola Response

Thank you for the work you're doing on this Ebola response. Work like this is demanding — physically and emotionally — and when you're focused on caring for others, your own wellbeing can suffer. This tip sheet looks at an experience that's very common among response staff: hypervigilance, and the toll it can take if it goes unaddressed.

What Is Hypervigilance?

Hypervigilance is your body staying “on alert” for danger, even when there's no immediate threat to you.

Think of it like an alarm bell in your body. Every time that alarm rings to signal potential danger — a security scare, an infection risk, distressing news — it gets a little more primed to ring again next time. That's useful at first: a sensitive alarm reacts fast when something real is happening. But after enough alarms ringing again and again, it starts to take less and less to set off your internal alarm. Eventually it can start to feel like it's ringing almost constantly, even in moments that aren't actually dangerous.

Responding to an outbreak gives your body's alarm system a lot of practice ringing. Constant attention to infection risks, safety, and community tension trains it to stay switched on, even in quieter moments. This is a normal reaction to an extremely demanding environment — not a sign of weakness or a personal failing.

Key point

The goal isn't to switch your alarm system off completely. It's to learn how to power it down when you're somewhere safe, so your body actually gets the rest it needs.

How Hypervigilance Can Show Up

Staying on high alert for long periods affects people in different ways. Common signs include:

- **In your body:** tense muscles, headaches, a racing heart, stomach trouble, tight or shallow breathing.
- **In your thinking:** trouble focusing on everyday tasks, forgetfulness, jumping to worst-case scenarios, fixating on things that are making you anxious or worried, constantly scanning for threats.
- **In your emotions:** irritability, sudden waves of anxiety, feeling “wired but exhausted,” or feeling numb and disconnected.
- **In your relationships:** pulling away from colleagues or family, snapping at people you care about, feeling isolated.

What Feeds Hypervigilance During a Response Like This

Here are some things that can make this kind of work hard on the nervous system:

- **Constant biosecurity vigilance:** following strict infection-control routines and staying alert to contamination risks, day after day.
- **Anxiety about personal health risks:** thoughts and worries related to your own risks of getting infected.
- **Community tension and rumors:** navigating mistrust, misinformation, or resistance to safety measures.

- **Unpredictable conditions:** disruptions to travel, communication, or security that are outside your control.
- **Distance from your usual supports:** being away from family, friends, and normal routines, sometimes under movement restrictions.

Know Your Own Early Warning Signs

Everyone's stress shows up a little differently. Look back at the list above and note the 2–3 signs that tend to show up first for you when you're becoming overstretched and your anxiety is heightened:

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

Knowing your own early signs means you can act on them sooner — before hypervigilance and anxiety takes a bigger toll.

What Helps Reduce Hypervigilance and Manage Anxiety in Healthy Ways

Small, consistent actions make the biggest difference. You don't need to try to attend to all of these at once — pick one or two to focus on this week.

Body

- Move your body every day. Even 10 minutes of brisk walking, stretching, or another form of exercise helps burn off the stress hormones that build up from staying on alert.
- Protect sleep and regular meals as much as your schedule allows.
- Try slow breathing throughout the day: in through your nose for 4 counts, out through your mouth for 6–8. A longer exhale helps your body downshift. Try to do this 3–4 times a day so you are sending your body regular signals to relax.
- Use a grounding moment when you feel particularly keyed up — pay attention to your feet flat on the floor, cool water on your hands, a short stretch.

Relationships

- Check in briefly with a colleague at the end of the day. Even five honest, supportive minutes helps.
- Stay in touch with family or friends outside the response, even briefly.
- Keep team conversations focused on what's helpful and grounding, rather than only repeating distressing details.

Mind

- Limit yourself to 2–3 trusted sources for updates about the outbreak and set a cut-off time for work content or outbreak-related news each day.
- Give your brain a break before bed — at least 15–20 minutes of something light, like music, a book, or a call with someone you love. Avoid intense or disturbing content late at night.
- Focus on what you can actually influence. You can't control the outbreak, security conditions, or a lot of the logistics around you — but you can influence your breathing, your routines, how much difficult information you take in, the precautions you are taking to manage personal risk, and who you lean on for support.

- Give worry a scheduled home. Set aside a specific 10–15 minute window each day to think through risks and precautions on purpose, rather than carrying that vigilance with you all day.

Work

- Build a “stand-down” ritual at the end of each workday — changing clothes, washing up, listening to music, or taking a short walk before you re-enter your living space. This gives your body an external cue that this phase of the day is over.
- Take a brief reset between difficult tasks or encounters—even 60–90 seconds—rather than moving straight from one to the next.
- Watch your caffeine and hydration in the second half of the day — both can mimic or intensify hypervigilance symptoms like a racing heart or restlessness and trigger anxiety.
- When you notice yourself being hard on yourself, try a self-compassion phrase, such as: “I’m doing the best I can in a genuinely difficult situation.” · “It’s okay that this feels hard.” · “I don’t have to do this perfectly to be doing enough.”

Purpose

- Take a moment each day to notice why this work matters to you.
- Notice small moments of connection, humor, or accomplishment — they count, even during very hard weeks.

When to Reach Out for More Support

Feeling some of these reactions during a response like this is normal and expected. But if hypervigilance or anxiety is stopping you from sleeping, making it hard to do your job well, or leaving you feeling hopeless, numb, or relying on alcohol or other risky habits to cope, it’s a sign you could use some extra support.

Reaching out isn’t a last resort — it’s one more tool for taking care of yourself so you can keep taking care of others. Your organization’s Employee Resilience Program (ERP) is a confidential place to start if you’re not sure where else to turn.