

Emergency Mental Health and Traumatic Stress

Tips for Emergency and Disaster Response Workers

Engaging in emergency efforts is inevitably stressful for workers. The long hours, breadth of needs and demands, ambiguous roles, and exposure to human suffering can adversely affect even the most experienced professional. While the work is personally rewarding and challenging, it also has the potential for affecting workers in harmful ways. Too often, the stress experienced by rescue workers is addressed as an afterthought. With a little effort, however, steps can be taken to minimize the effects of stress.

1. Make sure you understand the chain of command and reporting relationships, including who is your available and accessible supervisor at all times.
2. Attend and pay attention to all disaster orientation.
3. Shifts are 12 hours for a reason. Do not attempt to work longer or volunteer in another capacity on your "off" 12 hours. REST during those 12 hours.
4. Attend and pay attention in all briefings at the beginning of shifts as you enter the operation. Especially make sure you have necessary supplies (e.g., paper, forms, pens, educational materials, etc.) and communication tools (e.g., cell phones, radios, etc.).
5. Make sure you understand the clear purpose and goals of EACH SHIFT.
6. Review your written role descriptions for each assignment setting.
7. Connect with and nurture team support.
8. We will be using a buddy system to support and monitor stress reactions. Provide your buddy with a positive atmosphere of support and tolerance with frequent praise.
9. Set priorities for tasks with a realistic work plan.

Personal Strategies:

1. Balance lifestyle.
 - Get physical exercise and stretch muscles when possible.
 - Eat nutritiously and avoid excessive junk food, caffeine, alcohol, or tobacco.
 - Get adequate sleep and rest, especially on longer assignments.
 - Maintain contact and connection with primary social supports.
2. Apply stress reduction techniques.
 - Reduce physical tension by taking deep breaths, calming self through meditation, walking mindfully, etc.
 - Use time off for exercise, reading, listening to music, taking a bath, talking to family, or getting a special meal to recharge batteries.
 - Talk about emotions and reactions with coworkers during appropriate times.
3. Practice self-awareness.
 - Recognize and heed early warning signs for stress reactions. Watch for these signs of burnout: excessive tiredness, "loss of spirit", inability to concentrate, somatic symptoms (headache, GI distress), sleep difficulties,

grandiose beliefs about your own importance (neglecting your own health & safety needs (not “needing” to take breaks), cynicism, inefficiency, mistrust of team members, increased/excessive alcohol, caffeine, or smoking.

- Accept that one may not be able to self-assess problematic stress reactions.
- Avoid over identification with survivors'/victims' grief and trauma, which may interfere with discussing painful material.
- Understand differences between professional helping relationships and friendships.
- Examine personal prejudices and cultural stereotypes.
- Be mindful that vicarious traumatization or compassion fatigue may develop.
- Recognize when a personal disaster experience or loss interferes with effectiveness.

FOR SUPERVISORS:

1. Create a buddy system of workers to support each other.
2. Assess workers' functioning regularly. Watch for signs of rescue worker burnout (listed above). Contact worker supports, relieve of duties if needed.
3. Rotate workers between low-, mid-, and high-stress tasks.
4. Encourage breaks and time away from assignment. REST is crucial.
5. Provide individual and group defusing and debriefing.
6. Provide opportunity for workers leaving the operation to debrief, the opportunity to critique, and recognition for service.