

Managing Stress: A Guide for Emergency and Disaster Response Workers

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Managing Your STRESS

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

As a professional or volunteer working in a disaster relief situation, you are exposed to very stressful events for a period of time. Be aware of how these events can affect you personally. Monitor your own physical and mental health. Know the signs of stress in yourself and your coworkers. Know how to relieve stress. And know when to get help.

SIGNS OF STRESS

Behavioral Changes:

- Increase or decrease in activity level.
- Increased alcohol or tobacco use.
- Difficulty expressing yourself or understanding others.
- Irritability, outbursts of anger, frequent arguments.
- Inability to rest or relax.
- Decline in job performance.
- Frequent crying.
- Excessive worry.
- Becoming accident-prone.

Physical Changes:

- Nausea or diarrhea.

- Headaches and other pains.
- Visual disturbances.
- Weight gain or loss.
- Sweating or chills.
- Tremors or muscle twitching.
- Being easily startled.

Psychological/Emotional Changes:

- Feeling heroic, euphoric, or invulnerable.
- Anxiety or fear.
- Depression.
- Guilt.
- Apathy.
- Grief.

Thinking Changes:

- Memory problems.
- Disorientation and confusion.
- Slow thought processes; lack of concentration.
- Difficulty setting priorities or making decisions.

Social Changes:

- Isolation.
- Blaming.
- Difficulty in giving or accepting support or help.
- Inability to experience pleasure or have fun.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can manage and alleviate your stress by taking care of yourself while you are helping others. The quality of service you give others depends on you keeping yourself healthy.

Manage Your Workload:

- Set your task priorities with realistic work plans.
- Recognize that “waiting” and “not having enough to do” alternate with being “overwhelmed.”

Balance Your Lifestyle:

- Eat healthy foods and drink water.
- Avoid excessive caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco.
- Set adequate sleep and rest.
- Get physical exercise.
- Talk to your family and friends frequently.

Stress-Reduction Strategies:

- Reduce physical tension frequently by methods that work for you—take deep breaths, gentle stretching, meditation, wash face and hands, use relaxation techniques.

- Pace self between low- and high-stress activities.
- Use time off to “decompress” and “recharge batteries”—get a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, and talk to family.
- Talk about your feelings to coworkers at appropriate times.

Self-Awareness:

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Accept that you may not be able to self-access problematic stress reactions.
- Recognize that over-identification with or feeling overwhelmed by victims’ and families’ grief and trauma may signal a need for support and consultation.
- Understand the differences between professional helping relationships and friendships to help maintain appropriate roles and boundaries.
- Examine personal prejudices and cultural stereotypes.
- Recognize when your own experience with trauma or your own personal history interferes with effectiveness.
- Be aware of your personal vulnerabilities and emotional reactions and the importance of team and supervisor support.

SAMHSA Resources At-A-Glance

Information Clearinghouses

National Mental Health Information Center (NMHIC)

P.O. Box 42557, Washington, DC 20015

(800) 789-2647 (English and Español)

(866) 889-2647 (TTD)

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)

P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20847-2345

(800) 729-6686 (English and Español)

(800) 487-4889 (TTD)

www.ncadi.samhsa.gov

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Services Locator

(800) 789-2647 (English and Español)

(866) 889-2647 (TDD)

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

(800) 662-HELP (4357) (Toll-Free, 24-Hour English and Español

Treatment Referral Service)

(800) 487-4889 (TDD)

www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

(800) 273-TALK (8255)

(800) 799-4889 (TDD)

SAMHSA National Helpline

(800) 662-HELP (4357) (English and Español)

(800) 487-4889 (TDD)

Workplace Helpline

(800) WORKPLACE (967-5752)

www.workplace.samhsa.gov/helpline/helpline.htm