Returning Home After Disaster Relief Work

A Post-Deployment Guide for Supervisors of Deployed Personnel

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
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Many people who are involved, either directly or indirectly, in disaster work find it to be a unique blend of stressors and rewards. Both are typically powerful parts of the experience. After deployment, many workers have found the return to normal duties to be a complicated, prolonged, and difficult process. While some were deployed, others maintained the ongoing operation of the office. They too have experienced additional unexpected and unwelcomed demands possibly resulting in stress. This brochure is intended to assist supervisors in easing transition, reducing potential difficulties, and enhancing the positive consequences for the work unit.

Before Your Employees Return to Work

During disaster response and recovery efforts, your employees most likely worked under less than desirable conditions while taking care of others. Before they return to normal duties, you will want to offer your employees self-care tips to help them readjust to worklife. These include the following:

- Maintaining a healthy diet, routine exercise, adequate rest/sleep
- Spending time with family and friends
- Paying attention to health concerns
- Meeting neglected daily personal tasks (e.g., pay bills, mow lawn, shop for groceries)
- Reflecting upon what the experience has meant personally and professionally
- Getting involved in personal and family preparedness.

Expecting the Unexpected

Upon returning to their routine duties, your employees may notice changes in themselves, coworkers, or their work environment. The following are a few examples of potential difficulties your employees may face and some tips on how you, as a supervisor, can help to overcome them.

Pace change—The disaster environment often moves at a pace that is much faster than the normal workplace. After working in a disaster response environment, this pace begins to feel normal. When returning to normal work, it may appear that people are moving at a much slower pace than before. It is easy to misinterpret this as laziness or lack of caring or motivation.

- Help the deployed worker understand that it is probably him or her who has changed, not others.
- Discourage quick and unfair judgments, criticism, or assumptions.

Unrelenting fatigue—Even with what seems like sufficient sleep, deployed workers may experience chronic fatigue. Sometimes chronic stress results in never feeling rested. Chronic fatigue may also be a result of a medical condition.

- Recognize the factors contributing to chronic fatigue.
- Discuss and educate workers when appropriate.
- Encourage a medical evaluation if problem persists.

Cynicism—Typically, during disaster work one sees the best and the worst in individuals and systems and it is easy to become cynical. This is expected. These feelings often diminish over time once a worker is able to focus on the positive results of his or her work.

- Discuss with your worker if this behavior is disruptive.
- Assist employees in regaining perspective.
- Encourage a referral for help if this becomes a performance issue or begins to have an adverse effect on workplace climate.

Dissatisfaction with routine work—It is very rewarding to be involved, directly or indirectly, in saving lives and protecting our fellow citizen's health and safety. Most work does not provide such dramatic and immediate reinforcement. Deployed workers might start seeing their daily work routine as lacking meaning and satisfaction. These feelings are normal.

- Find ways to incorporate the positive things workers have learned and experienced during disaster response work in their personal and professional lives.

- If the worker found this work especially rewarding, facilitate ways he or she might become involved in future events.
- If a worker learned that this work is simply not a good match for his or her skills and temperament, that is also important information. This knowledge will help you, as a supervisor, select staff for future deployments.
- Reinforce the perspective that these types of roles are not for everybody…and that is OK.

Easily evoked emotions—Sometimes the combination of intense experiences, fatigue, and/or stress leaves deployed workers especially vulnerable to unexpected emotions. For example, they may cry easily, be quick to anger, or experience dramatic mood swings. These are normal reactions that typically subside over time. In the meantime, be aware of their reactions, discuss their experiences, and be sensitive of comments that might be hurtful or upsetting to others.

- Identify this phenomenon early. Provide support and education to employee.
- If strong emotions become disruptive in the workplace, encourage additional leave and/or encourage worker to seek additional help.
- Encourage workers to be aware and monitor their reactions.
- Encourage workers to discuss their experiences in environments where strong emotions are OK. This may not be the workplace.

Relating our experiences—Though an employee may want to share his or her experiences with others, he or she may be unsure if it is appropriate. This is normal.

- Caution workers that when discussing what they saw and did, care should be taken. In the disaster environment, discussing graphic and disturbing topics (e.g., death, bodies, and injuries) often becomes routine. It is easy to forget, when workers leave that environment, that others may be upset by what is reported.
- Alert workers to be sensitive when discussing their experiences with children and those in the workplace who may be especially emotionally vulnerable.

Difficulties with colleagues and supervisors—Deployed workers may not experience a welcome back from their colleagues and supervisors that meets his or her expectations. Coworkers may resent having to assume additional workloads, may not understand the difficulty of the work the responder did, or may resent the recognition that the responder receives.

- One strategy to reduce negative feelings is to acknowledge them; be sure that you show proper appreciation for the impact of deploying others.
- Restate the view that everyone is a part of the response (not only those directly deployed).
- If the deployment may have resulted in exposure to potentially contagious illnesses (or coworkers *believe* this to be the case), returning workers may be isolated or stigmatized. Accurate information, delivered by an authoritative and unbiased source can help in this situation.

Cultural issues—Culture affects how an individual reacts to trauma. For example, showing emotion, discussing problems with others, or touching is acceptable with some groups and not with others. On the basis of this understanding, it is important to appreciate and respect these differences.

- Know the cultural groups that you supervise.
- Be aware of cultural issues.
- Seek guidance and consultation from members of/brokers for cultural groups.
- Acknowledge the limitation of your cultural understanding.

When to Seek Help

Remember, stress is a normal reaction to abnormal situations like disasters. If your employees experience the following signs of persistent or severe stress, ask them to seek help from a licensed mental health professional.

- Disorientation (e.g., dazed, memory loss, unable to give date/time or recall recent events)
- Depression (e.g., pervasive feeling of hopelessness and despair, withdrawal from others)
- Anxiety (e.g., constantly on edge, restless, obsessive fear of another disaster)
- Acute psychiatric symptoms (e.g., hearing voices, seeing visions, delusional thinking)
- Inability to care for self (e.g., not eating, bathing, changing clothing, or handling daily life)
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts or plans
- Problematic use of alcohol or drugs
- Domestic violence, child abuse, or elder abuse

Sometimes it may be difficult to determine if what your workers are experiencing is a result of a physical illness or stress (or both). In some disaster situations, workers may have been exposed to infectious disease and/or environmental exposure that may result in signs and symptoms similar to stress. When in doubt, encourage employees to go see a health care professional.

Coping Suggestions

Help workers find ways to use their disaster experience to better understand themselves—Deployed workers have had an experience/opportunity that not many people have had. During that experience they undoubtedly learned things about themselves. What stresses them most? What were they able to handle in ways that surprised themselves? What unrecognized skills/talents did they discover? What did they learn about how you function in extreme environments?

Find ways to use their disaster experience to enhance job function—A deployed worker's normal job role probably does not involve disaster response.

What skills/knowledge did they bring from their normal role that was helpful? What skills/knowledge/perspective did they gain from the disaster deployment that can enhance normal job function? Did his or her experience point them in directions in which he or she would like to move professionally or did it make them cognizant of assignments he or she would like to seek or avoid?

Tips for Managers

Supervisors can be very helpful in helping returning workers gain perspective on their disaster response experience, minimize adverse consequences for both the individual and the workplace, and help workers grow both personally and professionally from the experience. Supervisors may consider discussing these issues in large or small groups or individually with workers.

Supervisors may consider the following:

- Be aware of and acknowledge your feelings about and experience with the disaster and the effect of the deployments.
- Create an organizational atmosphere where people can be open with you about their experiences, feelings, and concerns.
- Optimize liberal/flexible leave policies for returning workers. Consider holding large and/or small group meetings to discuss the experiences and their affect on the workplace and workload.
- Encourage people to seek additional help in ways that are culturally competent and do not stigmatize those needing or seeking help.
- Be candid about the complex and potentially difficult job you have as a supervisor—meeting both individual needs and the need to maintain ongoing work.
- Have a one-on-one conversation with returning employees about what they have experienced and how that may influence their return to work.

Getting Help

If you feel you need additional information, you may find this list of resources to be helpful.

SAMHSA Resources

Information Clearinghouses

SAMHSA's Health Information Network (SHIN)
P.O.Box 2345
Rockville, MD 20847-2345
Email: SHIN@samhsa.hhs.gov
(877) SAMHSA-7 or (877) 726-4727
(800) 487-4889 (TTY)
(240) 221-4292 (FAX)
www.samhsa.gov/shin

Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)
www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac

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)
SuicidePreventionLifeline.org

Other Federal Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—Mental Health
www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/

Federal Occupational Health Employee Assistance Program for Federal and Federalized Employees
www.foh4you.com or
(800) 222-0364
(888) 262-7848 (TTY)

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
www.ptsd.va.gov/

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—Employee Assistance Program
(202) 690-8229
HHSEAP@hhs.gov

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