Tips for Managing and Preventing Stress

A Guide for Emergency Response and Public Safety Workers

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

Stress prevention and management should be addressed in two critical contexts: the organization and the individual. Adopting a preventive perspective allows both workers and organizations to anticipate stressors and shape responses, rather than simply reacting to a crisis when it occurs. Suggestions for organizational and individual stress prevention and management approaches are presented below.

Organizational Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management

1. Provide effective management structure and leadership. Elements include:
   - Clear chain of command and reporting relationships.
   - Available and accessible supervisors.
   - Disaster orientation for all workers.
   - Shifts of no longer than 12 hours, followed by 12 hours off.
   - Briefings at the beginning of shifts as workers enter the operation. Shifts should overlap so that outgoing workers brief incoming workers.
   - Necessary supplies (e.g., paper, forms, pens, educational materials).
   - Communication tools (e.g., mobile phones, radios).
2. Define a clear purpose and goals.
3. Define clear intervention goals and strategies appropriate to the assignment setting.
4. Define roles by function.
5. Orient and train staff with written role descriptions for each assignment setting. When a setting is under the jurisdiction of another agency, inform workers of each agency's role, contact people, and expectations.
6. Nurture team support.
7. Create a buddy system to support and monitor stress reactions. Promote a positive atmosphere of support and tolerance with frequent praise.
8. Develop a plan for stress management. For example:
   - Assess workers' functioning regularly.
   - Rotate workers among low-, mid-, and high-stress tasks.
   - Encourage breaks and time away from assignment.

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- Educate about signs and symptoms of worker stress and coping strategies.
- Provide individual and group defusing and debriefing.
- Develop an exit plan for workers leaving the operation, including a debriefing, reentry information, opportunity to critique, and formal recognition for service

Individual Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management

1. Manage workload.
   - Set priority levels for tasks with a realistic work plan.
   - Delegate existing workloads so workers are not attempting disaster response in addition to their usual jobs.
2. 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.
3. Apply stress reduction techniques.
   - Reduce physical tension by activities such as taking deep breaths, meditating, and walking mindfully.
   - Use time off for exercise, reading, listening to music, taking a bath, talking to family, or getting a special meal.
   - Talk about emotions and reactions with coworkers during appropriate times.
4. Practice self-awareness.
   - Learn to recognize and heed early warning signs for stress reactions.
   - Accept that you may need help to assess problematic stress reactions.
   - Avoid overly identifying with survivors' and 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.

Normal Reactions to a Traumatic Event

- No one who responds to a mass casualty event is untouched by it.
- Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- You may not want to leave the scene until the work is finished.
- You likely will try to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment.
- You may deny the need for rest and recovery time.

Helpful Resources

National Mental Health Information Center
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and Español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Web Site: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
Toll-Free: 1-800-729-6686 (English and Español)
TDD: 1-800-487-4889
Web Site: www.ncadi.samhsa.gov

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Services Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and Español)
TDD: 1-866-889-2647
Web Site: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
(24/7 English and Español)
TDD: 1-800-487-4889
Web Site: www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)
Web Site: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Office for Victims of Crime
Toll-Free: 1-800-851-3420
TTY: 1-877-712-9279
Web Site: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ovcres/welcome.html

Other Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
Phone: 404-639-3311
Toll-Free: 1-800-311-3435
Web Site: www.cdc.gov/niosh/unp-trinstrs.html

Department of Veterans Affairs
National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
Phone: 802-296-6300
Web Site: www.ncptsd.va.gov

Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Signs That You May Need Stress Management Assistance

- Disorientation or confusion, and difficulty communicating thoughts.
- Difficulty remembering instructions. Difficulty maintaining balance.
- Becoming easily frustrated and being uncharacteristically argumentative.
- Inability to engage in problem solving and difficulty making decisions.
- Unnecessary risk taking.
- Tremors, headaches, and nausea.
- Tunnel vision and muffled hearing.
- Colds or flu-like symptoms.
- Limited attention span and difficulty concentrating.
- Loss of objectivity.
- Inability to relax when off duty.
- Refusal to follow orders or to leave the scene.
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol.
- Unusual clumsiness.

Ways to Help Manage Your Stress

- Limit on-duty work hours to no more than 12 hours per day.
- Rotate work from high-stress to lower stress functions.
- Rotate work from the scene to routine assignments, as practicable.
- Use counseling assistance programs available through your agency.
- Drink plenty of water, and eat healthy snacks such as fresh fruit, whole grain breads, and other energy foods.
- Take frequent, brief breaks from the scene, as practicable.
- Talk about your emotions to process what you have seen and done.
- Stay in touch with your family and friends.
- Participate in memorials and rituals, and use of symbols as a way to express feelings.
- Pair up with another responder so that you may monitor one another's stress.

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