



# Tips for Families of Returning Disaster Responders:

## ADJUSTING TO LIFE AT HOME

*It is a process of reconnection for you and all those connected to your loved one.*

### Introduction

Increasing attention is being paid to the challenges that emergency and disaster responders face as they perform their work and then return to their loved ones and normal routine. As the family member of a response worker, you have faced your own challenges in keeping your household functioning while your loved one was away. This tip sheet contains useful information to help you reunite with a loved one who has returned home after an assignment.

### Returning Home

Reunions following disaster assignments away from home are usually eagerly anticipated by all. While they can sometimes be harder than we expect, they can be effectively managed. When welcoming a loved one who is returning from disaster response work, keep the following in mind:

- Homecoming is more than an event; it is a process of reconnection for you and all those connected to your loved one.
- Even though coming home represents a return to safety, security, and “normality” for your loved one, the routines and pace at home are markedly different than life in a disaster zone.
- In your loved one’s absence, you and other household members have likely

Before your loved one returns to work and traditional duties, you can help remind him or her to address some basic needs that are often neglected during disaster response work. You can help your returning loved ones in the following ways:

- Encourage them to get adequate rest.
- Remind them to maintain a healthy diet and exercise routine, even if it’s just walking.
- Suggest they spend relaxation time with family and friends.
- Remind them of the importance of staying healthy and seeking medical care as needed.
- Help them catch up on neglected daily personal tasks (e.g., paying bills, mowing the lawn, shopping for groceries).
- Ask them to reflect upon what the experience meant personally and professionally.

assumed many roles and functions that may now need to change. Be patient during this period and recognize that many routines may not return—at least immediately—to what they were like previously.

- It may be helpful to take time to reconnect with your returning loved one before inviting your larger social circle to visit. Take the time you need first.



## Adjusting to Life at Home

Some other things to keep in mind while adjusting to the return of a loved one include the following:

- **Celebrating a homecoming is important** and should reflect your own style, preferences, and traditions.
- **Asking your returning loved one to refrain from discussing graphic, gruesome, and highly distressing details will help to avoid upsetting or traumatizing others.** This is especially important when discussing the experience with, or in the presence of, children. Consider sharing the more positive aspects of your experience.
- **Talking about disaster experiences is a personal and delicate subject for both you and your loved one.** Many people prefer to limit sharing such experiences with only a coworker or close friend. Often the need or desire to talk about the disaster experience will vary over time. Let your returning loved one take the lead. Listening rather than asking questions is the guiding rule. You might feel abandonment or anger about your loved one having been away, which might make it hard for you to listen actively and with empathy. These feelings are natural and will likely go away over time.
- **Keeping your social calendar fairly free and flexible for the first few weeks after the homecoming is important.** Respect the need for time alone and time with significant others, especially children.

## SIGNS OF STRESS

Below is a list of some of the common signs of stress to look for in your returning loved one. These are normal reactions to working in stressful situations, but if they persist for more than two weeks or worsen, professional help may be needed. Contact your primary care physician or seek assistance from a trusted mental health professional. Please also refer to the next section of this tip sheet, titled **When To Seek Help**.

- Anxiety, restlessness, fear
- Insomnia or other sleep problems
- Fatigue
- Recurring dreams or nightmares or intrusive thoughts
- Stomach or gastrointestinal upset/appetite change
- Heart palpitations/fluttering
- Preoccupation with the disaster events or people they helped
- Sadness and crying easily, hopelessness, or despair
- Hyper-vigilance; easily startled
- Irritability, anger, resentment, increased conflicts with friends/family
- Overly critical and blaming others or self
- Grief, guilt, self-doubt
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs, misuse of prescription medication
- Isolation or social withdrawal
- Morbid humor
- Decision-making difficulties
- Confusion between trivial and major issues
- Concentration problems/distractibility
- Job- or school-related problems
- Decreased libido/sexual interest
- Decreased immune response (e.g., frequent colds, coughs, other illnesses)

Explain to those who may feel slighted that this is a strong recommendation for returning disaster responders.

- **Allowing your loved one an adjustment period** will help him or her to adapt physically to the local time zone as well as to environmental changes, such as temperature, continuous noise, or interruptions.

- **Engaging in activities you enjoyed doing together**, such as playing games, shopping for food, sharing favorite meals, and other activities can help you reconnect.
- **Knowing that your children’s reactions may not be what you or your returning loved one may have expected or desired is important.** Very often children will act shy at first. They may withdraw or act angry as a response to their parent’s absence. Be patient and understanding concerning these reactions and give children time to get reacquainted.
- **Being flexible with your homecoming expectations** will allow you to share time without placing too much pressure on anyone. It is normal to experience some disappointment or letdown when the homecoming is not what you had hoped. The reality of homecomings and reunions seldom matches one’s ideas or desires.

Each day may be different and bring with it new or recurring challenges. With time, patience, and the use of available resources, a positive outcome can be achieved.

## When To Seek Help

Remember, post-assignment stress responses like those listed in this tip sheet are generally common reactions to traumatic situations like disasters. However, the following symptoms are signs of severe stress, or could indicate a medical emergency. If your loved one experiences these symptoms, seek the help of a primary care physician or mental health professional. You can also download the SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App and access resources specific to all deployment phases, including tips for re-entry (for responders, supervisors, and family members). The **Helpful Resources** section at the end of this tip sheet contains links to help you find a licensed mental health or substance abuse clinician.

Signs of when to seek help are as follows:

- Disorientation (e.g., having a “dazed” feeling, experiencing memory loss, not being able to give date/time or recall recent events)



- Significant depression (e.g., pervasive feeling of sadness, feeling alone and without the ability to experience any joy in living)
- Suicidal (e.g., pervasive feelings of hopelessness and despair) or homicidal thoughts or plans
- Anxiety (e.g., constantly on edge, restless, obsessive fear of another disaster)
- Acute psychiatric symptoms (e.g., hearing voices, seeing visions, having delusional thinking)
- Inability to care for self (e.g., not eating, bathing, changing clothing)
- Problematic use of alcohol or drugs, misuse of prescription medication
- Domestic violence, child abuse, or elder abuse

## Signs of Positive Change

Even though they may be experiencing some signs of stress, many returning disaster responders may also exhibit positive changes from the experience, such as the following:

- Not taking life for granted—living life to the fullest.
- Becoming more understanding and tolerant.
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones.
- Being grateful for what they have.
- Having an improved “perspective.”
- Experiencing enhanced spiritual connection.

## Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)

Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App

Website: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP13-DKAPP-1>

Administration for Children and Families\*

Website: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—Mental Health\*

Website: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth>

Department of Veterans Affairs\*

National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD Information Voicemail: 1-802-296-6300

Website: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov>

### Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)

TDD: 1-866-889-2647

Website: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator>

MentalHealth.gov

Website: <http://www.mentalhealth.gov>

*MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.*

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)

(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889

Website: <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

### Hotline

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov>

*This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.*

*\*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.*

## Multiple Disaster Response Assignments

Responders may be called to another disaster assignment after only a short time home. This can be challenging and stressful for everybody. It is natural to feel sad, even to cry. You have reconnected once again and begun to establish routines. Try to understand if your loved one distances him- or herself physically or emotionally in preparation for leaving.

At the time of departure, it is important that you let your loved one know how proud you are of his or her sacrifice and commitment. Expressing pride while saying goodbye is positive and can help strengthen everyone.

**If you or someone you know is struggling after a disaster, you are not alone.**

## Disaster Distress Helpline

PHONE: 1-800-985-5990

TEXT: "TalkWithUs" to 66746

WEB: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

**Call 1-800-985-5990 or text "TalkWithUs" to 66746 to get help and support 24/7.**

