

Support for Trauma Responders

National traumatic events have raised many questions about the emotional health of those workers who are called upon to respond.

These catastrophes thrust first responders, maintenance, utility workers and clean-up crews into life-and-death situations, disorganization, death, confusion and the pain and suffering of victims. Without support and education, some of these men and women could become "secondary victims." They are at greater risk for disaster-related illness, stress disorders and psychological problems.

Effects of disaster on psychological health

Researchers have studied the effects of stress from natural disasters since the 1940s. Most disaster workers only have mild, normal stress reactions. Yet, as many as one out of every three have emotional problems.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, the work to restore the community was overwhelming. It required long stress-filled days away from loved ones and familiar routines. For some, the toll on their lives was high.

The good news is that there is something that workers can do to better prepare for, and cope with the aftermath of, a disaster. Here are some suggestions.

Before a disaster

- Make decisions about daily routines. Making lunches, taking kids to school or practice, and grocery shopping may seem like small stuff but when no one is there to do them they can cause great distress.
- Prioritize the essentials and plan to cut out unnecessary activities until things stabilize.
- Ask your employer about available resources to you and your family, and how to make contact if needed.
- Make sure all your affairs are in order, including your will, your bank accounts, investments, etc. Be sure your spouse or significant other knows how to access joint accounts if a need arises for additional funds for emergency, travel or other expenses.
- Arrange for a family member, friend or caregiver to help out in the case of prolonged work duty.
- Talk about your feelings with your spouse or significant other. Assure your loved ones that you will take every precaution available.

After a disaster

- Attend any professional debriefings offered and learn what resources are available to you or your family.
- Talk about feelings as they arise, and be a good listener to your family and co-workers.
- Eat well and try to get caught up on your sleep (this may take several days).
- Understand that it's normal and healthy to want to talk about the disaster. It's also equally normal not to want to talk about it. Be judicious. Keep in mind that others may find it frightening or may simply be satisfied that you returned safely.
- Get "out of yourself." Avoid excessive introspection by focusing on the lives and activities of your loved ones. Ask them how they coped. Praise them for doing well in your absence.
- Find time to recharge doing something you enjoy. Go to a ballgame or to a movie. Get your mind off the disaster.
- Be patient with yourself and others. Remember your family and co-workers are stressed, too.
- Limit your exposure to news media reports about the disaster. While it is natural to want to know more, repetitive or sensationalized images and accounts can be harmful.
- Slow down. Get back to a normal pace in your daily life.

- Take it one day at a time. Each day provides a new opportunity to focus on what is really important in life. Many people turn to personal or spiritual resources during such times.

Personal support is essential

Although it is difficult to quantify, having someone (such as a family member) to talk with or simply “be with” after a disaster is a tremendous benefit. On the other hand, being alone or isolated from loved ones puts you at great risk for stress-related disorders, anxiety and depression. If you need help preparing for a disaster or coping in the aftermath, call the toll-free number on this site.

Sources:

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