

Emotional Health Issues for Disaster Workers

by the American Red Cross

As disaster workers seek to meet the needs of victims and communities following any type of disaster, they are surrounded by and exposed to disorganization, confusion, scenes of destruction, and the tears and the pain of victims.

Disaster workers have the potential to become "secondary victims," as they work long, hard hours under poor conditions. In some cases, physical dangers exist for responders. Worker accommodations may be poor when they are near or within the affected area, or may require an hour or more of travel when located outside the affected area. Personal support systems are left at home, and new supports must be formed while on the operation and while time is scarce. Supervisory styles are different from person to person, administrative organization and regulation often must change with little warning, adding additional stressors as workers try to satisfy the needs of the clients and of the organization.

Most disaster workers are dedicated individuals who also tend to be perfectionists. Because of this, they are at risk of pushing themselves too hard and of not being satisfied with what they have accomplished. With so much yet to do, they often fail to take credit for the amount of work completed and the effort contributed to the operation.

Frustration is common, and our usual sense of humor is often stretched beyond limits. Workers become exhausted, and anger comes easily to the surface. The anger of others -- workers, victims, and media -- becomes difficult to deal with, and may be seen as a personal attack on the worker rather than as a normal response to exhaustion. Survivor guilt may emerge as workers see the losses of others when they have suffered none themselves.

Coping: Remember that you are giving those victimized by the disaster a gift of yourself -- your time and your caring -- a gift you could not give if you were also a victim.

This may be your first experience with scenes of great destruction or high levels of injury and death. These are realities we don't often face, and methods of coping with these are not developed overnight. In each of us, there is an unconscious fear that a victim could be you or a loved one. You need to understand and appreciate the intensity of your emotions, and talk about your feelings to others.

Although we may function in superhuman ways during a disaster operation, the stress associated with our jobs takes its toll. We get tired . . . and confused . . . and hurt . . . and scared. It is critical both for ourselves and those we try to help that we understand the effects of stress and make every effort to deal with it.

Stress-relieving activities are not as difficult or time consuming as we may think. A 15-minute walk during a lunch or coffee break; talking to a co-worker, supervisor, or mental health worker; going out to dinner or a movie; or just learning and using deep breathing exercises can significantly reduce stress.

During the operation, it's important to eat nutritional foods, avoid drinking large amounts of caffeine and alcohol, get some exercise whenever possible, and get as much sleep as you can. That way you'll be better able to continue meeting the challenges of your job.

Your supervisors will be attempting to juggle schedules so that you can have some time off to yourself to sleep, read, or just sit in the sunshine. If you feel that you need this time off before you're scheduled for it, just ask. If you need a change of assignment or setting, just ask. And, hard as it may be to turn over your duties to someone else, when it is time for your shift to be over, leave and take time to recharge.