SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Tips for Disaster Responders:

PREVENTING AND MANAGING STRESS

Responding to disasters and other emergencies is critically important, and while personally rewarding, it also carries the potential for affecting responders in harmful ways. Dealing with persons affected by natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, earthquakes) is challenging. Disasters that are "human-caused" have the potential to produce even more negative mental health outcomes, whether harm is unintentional (e.g., industrial accidents, oil spill) or intentional (e.g., mass shootings, arson, acts of terrorism).

Engaging in disaster and emergency response work is stressful for both traditional first responders (e.g., fire, rescue, emergency medical services, law enforcement, emergency management personnel) and non-traditional first responders (e.g., behavioral health and public health professionals; paid and volunteer staff of community and faith-based organizations active in disasters).

Depending on the nature of the event, sources of stress may include exposure to scenes of human suffering and massive destruction, risk for personal harm, life-and-death decision making, intense workloads, limited resources, and separation from family members who may also be in harm's way.

Responders can take actions to protect themselves and to manage stress before a disaster or other traumatic event, as well as during the response and recovery phases. These actions can also help once the responder returns home after deployment or a particularly traumatic shift.

Introduction

Stress prevention and management begin long before you are called upon to respond to an emergency or disaster. This tip sheet presents a series of personal stress prevention and management skills that you can learn and practice *before* you are called upon to respond, as well as approaches you can apply to manage stress *during* your deployment. You can also download SAMHSA's new Disaster Behavioral Health App and access resources specific to pre- and post-deployment (for responders, supervisors, and family members).

Stress Prevention and Management

PREPARING FOR YOUR DISASTER ASSIGNMENT

The ideal time for taking actions to prevent stress and to strengthen your stress management skills is *before* your disaster assignment. Responder stress can be diminished by practicing for the disaster role, developing a personal toolkit of stress management skills, and preparing yourself and your loved ones.

Practice for the Disaster Role: Know Your Job

- *Train hard and know your job well*. You will perform at peak capacity, with more confidence and less stress, if you know you are as ready as you can be.

- *Participate in exercises and simulations* that expose you to disaster stressors. This will strengthen your skills and prepare you to deal with the unexpected.
- *Keep a freshly stocked Go-Kit* in your car or at your worksite and make sure to include your top choices for stress reducers.
- *Know the Incident Command System* so that you understand the language, the lines of reporting, and ways to work effectively with responders from other units.
- *Live the "disaster-ready" healthy lifestyle*: regular physical activity, healthy diet, and emotional stability. Clear thinking will make you a valuable team member—while decreasing your personal risk for harm.

Practice Stress Management: Make Stress Management #1 on Your List

- *Know your personal signs of stress.* Include coworkers in your stress control plan; they can tip you off when they see your stress signs "showing."
- *Identify the major stressors* associated with disasters to which you may respond, and plan how you will address them.
- *Create a team culture and a buddy system* where you can choose to spend off-duty time exercising, relaxing, or talking together.
- *Take time for yourself.* Mentally disconnect from the disaster scene as completely as possible during down time.
- *Select and practice constructive ways to release stress*, such as the following:
  - Choose physical activity that can be done safely while on deployment, like walking, stretching, and taking deep breaths.
  - Read or listen to music that is timed to your breath.
- *Practice healthy sleep behaviors.* Train your body to downshift by getting into a routine sleep pattern.

Prepare and Plan With Your Loved Ones

- *Reduce your concerns* by preparing your loved ones and protecting your home and your possessions for possible emergencies.
- *Create a communication plan* that allows you to stay connected to your loved ones, whether you are responding to a disaster close to or away from home.
- *Develop a home disaster plan for you and your loved ones*, being sure to actively involve all members in the process. Conduct disaster drills to test and improve your plan.
- *Prepare emergency supplies for sheltering* at home and Go-Kits for your loved ones in case they need to evacuate.
- *Consider declining the next disaster assignment* opportunity if you have had a recent death or trauma in your own family.

DURING YOUR DISASTER ASSIGNMENT

During the impact phase of a disaster or emergency event, the focus of stress management shifts to handling the real-time stressors of the rescue and recovery mission.

Set Your Personal Disaster Plan in Motion

- *Activate your personal disaster plan* and include loved ones who may be directly affected by the event.
- *Review your communication plan*. Know where each family member and/or loved one will be located and at what times each day you will be checking in with each other.
- *Double check your response "gear,"* including your Go-Kit and your communication equipment.

Take Stress-Reducing Precautions While on Duty

- *Make sure you are briefed and updated* regularly on the specifics of the event and the hazards.
- *Safeguard yourself* by always wearing the personal protective equipment recommended for use in the incident.

- *Verify your response duties* and reporting lines at the start of your assignment daily.
- *Mentally rehearse* your disaster response role as you approach each scene.
- *Communicate and check in* with your buddy, teammates, and supervisors regularly.
- *Take breaks* regularly. Pace yourself.
- *Limit time* spent working in very high-intensity settings (e.g., "ground zero," "hot zone").

Set Your Self-Care Plan in Motion

- *Try to eat nutritiously* and avoid excessive junk food (especially foods high in sugar), caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco.
- *Maintain contact* with family and other social supports during off-duty hours.
- *Get enough rest and sleep*, especially on long assignments.

Implement Stress Management Techniques

- *Reduce physical tension* by exercising, stretching, taking deep breaths, and walking.
- *Use time off* for reading, listening to music, talking with family, and thinking calmly.
- *Talk with teammates* about reactions and emotions as appropriate.

Practice Self-Awareness

- *Recognize* your personal stress signs—and those of your teammates. Agree with your buddies that you will accept each other's instruction when signaled to stop and take a "stress break" to calm down.
- *Avoid over-identifying* with survivors' grief and trauma. For example, remind yourself this is not happening to you or your loved ones.
- *Be aware* that some responders reach a limit in their abilities to continually provide care and empathy to survivors. This is known as "compassion fatigue." Accept when you need to end direct contact with survivors and alert your team leader for support.

AFTER YOUR RESPONSE ASSIGNMENT

Stress Management When Response Extends Into the Recovery Phase

In the recovery phase, stress management techniques must also take into account your exposure to disaster survivors who may be experiencing severe hardships.

- *Recognize* that when you are working at a disaster scene with severely limited resources, your personal stress may increase.
- *Know where to refer survivors* so you can connect them to the services they need.
- *Conserve energy.* You will need to recognize the fatigue effects of long-term deployment and know when to conserve your energy.
- *Take time away from the scene.* Alternate between on-scene and off-scene duty, and between time spent doing physically exhausting work or working with highly stressed survivors and time on less stressful tasks.
- *Use stress management skills* like deep breathing as often as you can.
- *Focus on reintegration* with friends, loved ones, and coworkers who did not share the experience with you. Pay extra attention to rekindling relationships.

Signs of Stress

What are common signs that you may be experiencing stress? And how do you know when your stress level is becoming harmful? *Hint: You may be able to "see" these stress signs better in your teammates than in yourself.*

- **Bodily sensations and physical effects**
  Rapid heart rate, palpitations, muscle tension, headaches, tremors, gastrointestinal distress, nausea, inability to relax when off duty, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, nightmares or flashbacks
- **Strong negative feelings**
  Fear or terror in life-threatening situations or perceived danger, anger, frustration, argumentativeness, irritability, deep sadness, difficulty maintaining emotional balance
- **Difficulty thinking clearly**
  Disorientation or confusion, difficulty problem-solving and making decisions, difficulty remembering instructions, inability to see situations clearly, distortion and misinterpretation of comments and events
- **Problematic or risky behaviors**
  Unnecessary risk-taking, failure to use personal protective equipment, refusal to follow orders or leave the scene, endangerment of team members, increased use or misuse of prescription drugs or alcohol
- **Social conflicts**
  Irritability, anger and hostility, blaming, reduced ability to support teammates, conflicts with peers or family, withdrawal, isolation

Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857
Toll-free: 1–877–SAMHSA–7 (1–877–726–4727)
TTY: 1–800–487–4889
Email: samhsainfo@samhsa.hhs.gov
SAMHSA Store: https://store.samhsa.gov

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)
Toll-free: 1–800–308–3515
Email: dtac@samhsa.hhs.gov
Website: https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac

SAMHSA Disaster Mobile App
Website: https://store.samhsa.gov/product/samhsa-disaster

Administration for Children and Families
Website: https://www.acf.hhs.gov

Department of Veterans Affairs
National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
PTSD Information Voicemail: 1–802–296–6300
Website: https://www.ptsd.va.gov

Treatment Locators

FindTreatment.gov
Website: https://findtreatment.gov/locator

SAMHSA's National Helpline
Toll-free: 1–800–662–HELP (1–800–662–4357) (24/7/365 treatment referral information service in English and español)
TTY: 1–800–487–4889
Website: https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

Hotlines

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline
Toll-free talk or text: 1–800–985–5990
Español: Llama o envía un mensaje de texto 1–800–985–5990 presiona "2".
American Sign Language (ASL): Click on the "ASL Now" button on the website or call 1–800–985–5990 from your videophone.
Website: https://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
Call or text: 988
Chat: 988lifeline.org
(Español) Línea de Prevención del Suicidio y Crisis: 988
For TTY users: Use your preferred relay service or dial 711 and then 988.
Website: https://988lifeline.org
Website (español): https://988lifeline.org/es/home

National Domestic Violence Hotline
Toll-free: 1–800–799–SAFE (1–800–799–7233)
TTY: 1–800–787–3224

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Publication No. PEP23-01-01-006
(Revised 2023; previously SMA-14-4873)