Adjusting to Life After Disaster Relief Work

Disaster relief work can be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help people in need of your expertise and assistance. It is a uniquely rewarding way to use the skills you have developed as a service member. But disaster relief work can also cause stress, which may not end when you complete your assignment. You can reduce the stress by taking care of yourself after your return and seeking help if you have trouble readjusting to your usual routines.

What to expect
Disasters are difficult to understand. When they occur, people wonder: Why did this happen? This question can be especially unsettling for disaster relief workers who have seen the effects and been directly involved with the catastrophe firsthand. After returning home, it may help to keep in mind these tips from the National Mental Health Information Center on understanding the aftermath of a disaster:

• No one who sees a disaster is untouched by it.
• It is normal to feel sadness, grief, and anger about what happened and what you saw.
• It is also natural to feel anxious about your and your family’s safety.
• Acknowledging your feelings will help you move forward more quickly.
• Focusing on your contributions, strengths, and abilities can help you heal if you are troubled by what you experienced.
• Everyone has different needs and a different way of coping. This is normal.
• It is healthy to reach out for and accept help if you need it.

Your physical and emotional health
As you think about the experiences you had, you may realize you have additional concerns as well. Disaster work is challenging physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. You may have worked for long hours in areas that were overcrowded or had poor sanitation or other health risks. You may have witnessed scenes of great pain and loss of human life. And you may have had to cope with shortages of basic supplies or resources that you usually take for granted. All of this may have had a cumulative effect on you that can continue after you return home.
The National Mental Health Information Center recommends seeking professional help if you have any of the following ongoing symptoms after finishing your relief work:

- physical aches and pains
- colds or flu-like symptoms
- changes in your vision or hearing
- insomnia, sleeping too little or too much
- increased use of alcohol or drugs
- limited attention span or decreased concentration
- poor work performance
- confusion or disorientation
- reluctance to leave home or be alone
- feelings of hopelessness or helplessness
- mood swings or elevated anger
- crying easily, prolonged sadness, or depression
- overwhelming guilt or self-doubt

Some of the above symptoms may be signs of ongoing stress. They may also be signs of an illness or serious physical condition. For example, flu-like symptoms can be a sign of meningitis, a potentially fatal disease that can spread quickly in crowded areas such as shelters and refugee camps. *Don’t take chances with your health.* Call a doctor if you develop unexplained physical symptoms after returning from a place where you faced an increased risk of illness.

**Taking care of yourself**

After being away and taking care of others, you will probably now need to spend some time focusing on and taking care of yourself.

- *Pay attention to your health.* Make an extra effort to get enough sleep and eat balanced meals. Keep up any other habits that you normally practice to maintain good health, such as getting regular exercise and taking vitamins or medications that your doctor has prescribed.

- *Maintain normal routines.* You may find projects or invitations from friends waiting for you after you return. Some people need time to readjust before they jump back into their usual routines and relationships. Others find it helpful to resume their activities and connect with family and friends right away. Think about what you need to do for yourself and act accordingly.
• **Spend time with supportive family and friends.** Doing disaster relief work can be emotionally overwhelming and isolating. Spend time with people who will understand if you don’t want to talk about your experiences right away. On the other hand, if you do need to talk about some events, choose to be with someone you feel is able to be supportive, understanding, and patient.

• **Build “down time” into your schedule.** After working long hours in a stressful setting, you need time to unwind. Actually scheduling a specific time or day to relax can help you keep the commitment you made to yourself.

• **Avoid using alcohol or drugs to ease stress.** Alcohol can act as a depressant and make you feel worse instead of better. It can also disrupt your sleep. You may experience other problems with sleeping or working if you overuse sugar, coffee, tea, caffeinated sodas, or nicotine. These can have an overstimulating effect.

• **Look for healthy ways to ease tension.** You may want to learn a few meditation or deep-breathing techniques. Set aside time to walk, exercise, write in a journal, listen to soothing music, or engage in any activity that has helped you relieve stress in the past.

• **Focus on the tasks and goals you have now.** While you were doing disaster work, you may have had to focus all of your energies on that one task, and it may be hard to switch gears after returning. It’s important to be able to give your best efforts to work, people, and things you have to focus on now. This will help you better manage any stress that you feel. It will also enable you to keep making a different kind of contribution through your work and in your relationships.

• **Expect the unexpected.** You may have certain expectations of how things went while you were away or how things should be now that you’ve returned. Your loved ones may have different expectations. Keeping the lines of communication open with each other will help in making the transition smoother for everyone.

**Talking about your experience**

Returning home will be easier if you can talk to people you trust about your feelings and experiences. It’s important to be able to share not just difficult emotions -- such as grief, disbelief, or frustration -- but also the satisfaction you felt when you could help someone in need.

• **Share your feelings with the people closest to you.** Some experiences will be easiest to share with people who know you well. You may want to talk to them before you try to describe your experiences to more distant friends or loved ones. If certain things are hard to describe or to begin talking about, you might start the conversation by bringing out photographs or talking about a news report related to your disaster work.

• **Allow others to talk about the experiences they had while you were away.** Everyone you interact with may need a chance to express their feelings and share their
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experiences with you about what it was like for them while you were away. Listening is important, even if you feel a little disconnected to what others are saying or don’t have an immediate response for them.

- **Stay in touch with the people you worked with on disaster relief.** They understand your experiences better than anybody else. Stay in touch with them through calls or e-mails. These people may be especially helpful if your family and friends don’t seem to understand what you went through. Staying in touch will also allow you to help them if they’re under stress.

- **Be aware that members of the media may try to contact you.** Reporters are often very interested in the stories of people who have returned from disaster relief work. Make sure you know your service branch’s policies about talking to the media and what, if any, clearances you need for this.

**Signs and symptoms**

Most people adjust to life after disaster relief work, though the time required can vary greatly from person to person. If stress reactions persist, however, or are interfering with your personal or work life following your relief assignment, it is important to seek professional help.

The following ongoing signs and symptoms may indicate that someone may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

- flashbacks (recurring scenes, pictures, and conversations)
- nightmares or other sleep problems
- difficulty concentrating or communicating
- feelings of anger, anxiety, sadness, depression, crying a lot
- feeling afraid to be alone or only wanting to be alone
- frightening or recurring thoughts
- feeling numb or as though you’re on “automatic pilot”

A person experiencing post-traumatic stress may experience a few or many of the above symptoms. If responses and reactions like the ones described here continue for months, or if they are interfering in your life to any extent, it’s important to seek professional help immediately. Talking with a professional can help you recover from your trauma and feel better more quickly.

Even if you don’t have signs of PTSD, it’s important to get help if any of your symptoms are interfering with your work or relationships, or if you are still feeling very low after others have moved on in their adjustment period. You can use the resources listed below to find help.
Resources
There are many resources available to provide help for service members and their families during this challenging time:

Your installation’s support services
Depending on your service branch, your Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Airman and Family Readiness Center, or Army Community Service Center can provide support as you go through this difficult time.

Military OneSource
This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at www.militaryonesource.com.

Don’t let concern about cost stand in your way. Tricare may cover such services for family members in some cases (for information call your regional Tricare office and ask about mental health benefits or visit their Web site at www.tricare.osd.mil). Other outside family health insurance may also cover mental health services; community mental health centers must charge people within their service area on a sliding scale.

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