A Guide to Managing Stress in Crisis Response Professions

CHAPTER IV. Self-Care for Crisis Response Professionals

- Self Monitor for Signs of Stress
- Minimizing Stress

Supervisors, managers, and workers must assume responsibility for their own self-care. Self-awareness involves recognizing and heeding early warning signs of stress reactions. There are many things that you can do to alleviate stress before, during, and after a crisis occurs (see chart on facing page). This chapter outlines some ideas that can be put in place to help you and your family cope with whatever emergencies may occur. Peace of mind and concentration will be enhanced if you are prepared.

Self Monitor for Signs of Stress

Be familiar with the signs of too much stress. Common stress reactions are provided in Chapter I. Usually, the symptoms are normal in every way, and simply suggest a need for corrective action to limit the impact of a stressful situation (Mitchell & Bray, 1990; Selye, 1984). Information is also provided in Chapter I about when stress becomes abnormal and destructive (PTSD).

Whether you are a supervisor or worker, you may not be the best judge of your own stress as you become intensely involved in the disaster work. Therefore, a buddy system, where coworkers agree to keep an eye on each other's stress reactions, can be important.

Before the Crisis

Your entire family should be involved in developing and maintaining a family emergency preparedness plan. Excellent materials on home emergency preparedness are available from the U.S. DHS, FEMA, local chapters of the American Red Cross, and local Offices of Emergency Services.

For more information on personal preparedness, go to www.ready.gov.

Minimizing Your Stress Before the Crisis

- Post a weekly schedule at home so that family members can be located in an emergency.
- Develop a home safety and evacuation plan, and review and practice it regularly.
- Create child care and pet care plans.
- Design a plan for how family members will contact each other during a crisis.
- Familiarize yourself with the disaster plans in your children's schools and in each family member's workplace.
• Gather and store emergency supplies including food, water, first aid kits, battery-operated radio, flashlights, and extra batteries.
• Prepare an emergency bag in advance in case you are deployed.
• Take advantage of any pre-disaster training and orientation that your organization provides, including cultural sensitivity awareness.

During the Crisis

It’s normal to experience stress during a disaster operation, but remember that stress can be identified and managed (Aid Workers Network, 2003). You are the most important player in controlling your own stress. There are many steps you can take to help minimize stress during a crisis.

Minimizing Your Stress During the Crisis

• Adhere to established safety policies and procedures.
• Encourage and support coworkers.
• Recognize that "not having enough to do" or "waiting" are expected parts of disaster mental health response.
• Take regular breaks whenever you experience troubling incidents and after each work shift. Use time off to "decompress."
• Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and gentle stretching.
• Eat regular, nutritious meals and get enough sleep.
• Avoid alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and excessive caffeine.
• Stay in contact with your family and friends.
• Pace self between low and high-stress activities.

After the Crisis

You may finish a disaster response project in a state of physical and emotional fatigue, and you may feel some ambivalence about giving up your disaster role. Be aware that you may experience some "letdown" when the disaster operation is over (CMHS, 1994). It is important to give yourself time to stop and reflect on the experience and how it changed you. Following are some action steps that may be helpful to get closure in the weeks after the crisis.

Minimizing Your Stress After the Crisis

• Consider participating in organized debriefing or critique.
• Reconnect with your family.
• Have a physical checkup.
• Continue normal leisure activities. Stay involved with your hobbies and interests.
• Consider stress management techniques such as meditation, acupuncture, and massage therapy.
• Draw upon your spirituality and personal beliefs. Take advantage of faith-based counselors and workplace counseling units.
• Avoid using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to cope with stress. Seek professional substance abuse treatment if necessary.
• Use Employee Assistance Programs if you need to.

In Summary

Stress management is key to emergency management. Successful stress management is built on prevention and planning, a solid understanding of roles and responsibilities, support for colleagues, good self-care, and seeking help when needed.
Crisis response professionals may be repeatedly exposed to unique stressors during the course of their work. Successful implementation of any stress management plan requires overcoming some obstacles and barriers, including priority setting, resource allocation, organizational culture, and stigma.

Taking action to prevent and reduce stress is a critical element of effective emergency management and supports those in crisis response professions in their collective healing and recovery.

**Individual Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management**

**Management of Workload**

- Set task priority levels with realistic work plans.
- Recognize that "not having enough to do" or "waiting" is an expected part of disaster mental health response.

**Balanced Lifestyle**

- Eat nutritious food and staying hydrated, avoiding excessive caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco.
- Get adequate sleep and rest, especially on longer assignments.
- Get physical exercise.
- Maintain contact and connection with primary social supports.

**Stress Reduction Strategies**

- Reduce physical tension by using familiar personal strategies (e.g., take deep breaths, gentle stretching, meditation, wash face and hands, progressive relaxation)
- Pace self between low and high-stress activities.
- Use time off to "decompress" and "recharge batteries" (e.g., get a good meal, watch TV, exercise, read a novel, listen to music, take a bath, talk to family).
- Talk about emotions and reactions with coworkers during appropriate times.

**Self-Awareness**

- Recognize and heed early warning signs for stress reactions.
- Accept that one may not be able to self-assess problematic stress reactions.
- Recognize that over-identification with or feeling overwhelmed by victims' and families' grief and trauma may signal a need for support and consultation.
- Understand the differences between professional helping relationships and friendships to help maintain appropriate roles and boundaries.
- Examine personal prejudices and cultural stereotypes.
- Recognize when one's own experience with trauma or one's personal history interfere with effectiveness.
- Be aware of personal vulnerabilities and emotional reactions and the importance of team and supervisor support.