

Disaster Relief Work: Coping and Taking Care of Yourself

Overview

Ways to stay strong physically and emotionally when doing disaster relief work.

- How you may feel
- Ways to take care of yourself and others
- When to seek professional help

Relief work following a major disaster, catastrophe, or emergency is both stressful and rewarding. You may have a good deal of professional training and experience in working in trauma settings. Or you may be an aid worker, medical worker, or soldier new to this kind of work. No matter how limited or extensive your experience may be as a relief worker, it is essential that you take care of yourself so that you stay strong physically and emotionally during this demanding time.

How you may feel

Disaster relief work is physically and mentally demanding. You may be helping victims and survivors deal with grief, physical and emotional trauma, and the sudden loss of life of those close to them or members of their community. You may witness distressing scenes, the sight of human tragedy, and may never feel fully prepared for the magnitude of everything you see and hear. You are probably working long hours with little time off. For all of these reasons, it is not uncommon for disaster relief workers to experience symptoms of stress. Some of these are described below.

Physical signs of stress

- headaches
- backaches
- upset stomach
- diarrhea or constipation
- changes in appetite, eating too much or too little
- changes in usual sleep patterns

Emotional signs of stress

- irritability
- frustration
- exhaustion
- feeling overwhelmed
- sadness
- feelings of despair or hopelessness, of not being able to “do enough” or “fix it”

- difficulty concentrating
- nightmares
- social withdrawal

It is normal to experience symptoms of stress during or after a disaster relief effort. One study published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* showed that 30 percent of returning relief workers reported stress symptoms. However, these usually subside over time. It's important that you monitor how you are feeling and take steps to manage your stress if you are experiencing any of the above symptoms. If symptoms of stress are interfering with your ability to work or cope, it is important to seek support from a professional.

Ways to take care of yourself and others

When you take care of yourself, you are better able to take care of the people you are working to help. Here are steps to take to help manage symptoms of stress:

- *Take breaks.* Relief work can be physically tiring and mentally exhausting. Take breaks when on the job, especially if you find you are making mistakes or are unable to concentrate, and even if you don't feel that you need a break.
- *Spend time away from the disaster site.* It's common not to want to leave the site for fear of missing something important, disappointing your co-workers, or not being there to make a difference at the very moment when you think you'll be most needed. It's important to change your surroundings even if it's just for a short period of time.
- *Spend time with other relief workers or co-workers.* It's important to spend some time alone. But it's also important to be with people. Talk about things other than the disaster -- home, friends, and family. Balancing your time spent alone and your time spent with others is necessary for your own mental health.
- *Work as a team.* Get to know your co-workers. Talk about what you are feeling and experiencing. Share coping skills. Ask others for what you need, and support others in getting what they need.
- *Watch for signs of extreme stress or fatigue in others.* If you have concerns about a co-worker, talk with him or her about it. Sometimes you may even want to talk with a supervisor or manager on-site to help your co-worker get relief.
- *Be mindful of your own health.* Get enough sleep and try to eat regular meals even if you don't feel hungry. Try to continue with as many of your usual routines as possible (taking your regular medications, daily vitamins, getting exercise, reading before bedtime, etc.).
- *Find ways to relieve tension.* Techniques like deep breathing or meditation are helpful. Also try to exercise, even if it's just for a few minutes a day of stretching during your assignment or in your bed, or taking a walk with a co-worker.

- *Stay focused on the tasks at hand.* Especially in a disaster of enormous proportions, it can be overwhelming to think about the “big picture.” Make a conscious effort to stay focused on daily tasks or weekly goals. This will help you feel less stressed and allow you to get even more accomplished.
- *Seek help in coping with stress.* Talking with a counselor, chaplain, or other professional can help. Sometimes a listening ear is all you need to get through a stressful time. Ask your manager or supervisor and co-workers for support as well. Be sure to take advantage of any resources offered by your organization, such as on-site debriefing with professionals. Know how to get in touch with your employee resource program or employee assistance program (EAP).
- *Avoid using alcohol or drugs to relax or relieve stress.* Alcohol can act like a depressant and may make you feel more lethargic and even depressed. Smoking excessively, over-use of sugar, or drinking a lot of coffee or caffeinated soda can have an over-stimulating effect.
- *Stay in touch with family and co-workers back home.* Even in remote areas, there is often technology to help you communicate, such as exchanging e-mail and digital photos, telephone calls, faxing, text messaging, and regular mail.
- *Don't force yourself to “tough it out” if the stress becomes too much.* It's possible that you might not be able to complete your assignment. There are times when even disaster relief workers are unable to continue due to a variety of past or present stressors or experiences. It won't help anyone, including you, if you tough it out when you know you're actually unable to continue.
- *Remind yourself of the tremendous contribution you are making.* Whether your disaster relief work was voluntary or a part of your work assignment, you are making a tremendous impact on the people you are helping. Many times they wouldn't have survived without your personal contribution and assistance.

When to seek professional help

Following a sudden or frightening event like a natural disaster or catastrophe, many people experience emotional reactions for some time afterward. Then life begins to return to “normal” again. If stress reactions persist 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):

- mood swings, experiencing major highs and lows
- feelings of anger, frequent irritability, or losing your temper easily
- sadness, crying a lot, or feelings of depression

- feeling shaky or panicky
- sleep problems, including insomnia, interrupted sleep, or nightmares
- changes in appetite, eating too much or too little
- difficulty concentrating, having limited recall, or memory problems
- withdrawing from family and friends
- feeling afraid to be alone
- event or scene flashbacks
- frightening or recurring thoughts
- headaches, stomachaches, or backaches
- heart palpitations or shortness of breath (see your doctor immediately if you are experiencing either of these symptoms)
- feeling numb or like 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 months following your assignment, or if they are interfering with your work or personal life, it's important to seek professional help. Talking with a trained professional can help you recover from your trauma and feel better more quickly. Your EAP or employee resource program can help you get professional assistance.

Emergency relief work can be very difficult, but it can also be enormously gratifying. By taking extra steps to care for yourself and your needs, you will likely emerge from the experience feeling proud of the enormous contribution you are making.

Adapted from The Field Operations Guide for Disaster Assessment and Response (FOG), developed by the U.S. Agency for International Development/Bureau for Humanitarian Response/Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and written with the help of Marjorie Dyan Hirsch, D.C.S.W., C.E.A.P., C.A.S.A.C., B.C.E.T.S. Ms. Hirsch is an organizational crisis management specialist, corporate consultant, executive coach, and trainer. Ms. Hirsch provided debriefings for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) during the Oklahoma City bombing and also provided debriefings for many major corporations after both World Trade Center crises. She is CEO of The Full Spectrum in New York City.

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