

Dealing with Employee Stress in Times of Disaster

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Learning Objectives

The participant will be able to:

- Recognize common reactions and sources of employee stress during disaster
- Define signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue and traumatic stress
- Apply resilience principles in the work environment

Phases of Disaster

- **Impact** (minutes – hours – days)
 - Intense stress, “fight or flight” response
 - Physical, emotional, & behavioral reactions
- **Immediate aftermath** (1 – 6 days)
 - Physical stress symptoms, cognitive preoccupation
 - Wide range of emotions, mood fluctuations
- **Recovery** (1 – 6 months)
 - Reactions diminish, cope with feelings better
- **Resolution** (6+ months)
 - Less emotion, no longer preoccupied with disaster

Effects of Disaster

- Physiological
- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Social
- Behavioral (job performance)

Risk Factors

Greater disaster exposure => Stronger reactions

- “No one who sees a disaster is untouched by it”
(American Red Cross)
- Stress reactions during and after disaster are understandable and predictable
- Prolonged, intense exposure to traumatic aspects of a disaster places someone at higher risk of distress and impairment
- Caregivers are *not* immune to disaster-related stress reactions

Sources of Employee Stress

During disaster impact:

- Increased job demands
- Personal disaster impact
- Work-family conflicts
- Problems with job performance

Sources of Employee Stress

During disaster recovery:

- Continued job demands
- Personal disaster recovery
- Adjustment to losses and permanent changes
- Reminders of disaster and threat of re-occurrence

Risk Factors

Employees whose home communities were directly impacted by disaster may experience:

- Greater sense of vulnerability, loss of safety
- Repeated exposure to reminders of disaster
- Prolonged exposure to disaster-related distress
- Damage to self-identity as “helper”

Consequences of Employee Stress

- **Compassion fatigue**
 - physical, emotional, and spiritual fatigue that causes a decline in a person's ability to experience joy or to feel and care for others (Wetzel, 2003)
- **Traumatic stress**
 - emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physiological experiences of individuals who are exposed to, or who witness, events that overwhelm their coping and problem solving abilities (Lerner & Shelton, 2001)

Risk Factors

- Involvement in disaster response and recovery
- Lack of information to work effectively
- Increased work demands
- Patient distress
- Feeling of vulnerability
- Conflict between work and home life

Boscarino, Figley, & Adams (2003); Eidelson, D'Alessio, & Eidelson (2003)

Overcoming Traumatic Stress

- Accept that symptoms are consequences of disaster exposure, and need to be addressed
- Learn to develop and maintain “a nonanxious presence” (Gentry, 2004)
- Use support network effectively
- Emotionally process painful events

Overcoming Compassion Fatigue

- Reconnect with your mission
- Accept that your best is all you can do
- Act intentionally, in accordance with your mission, to regain your sense of integrity (Gentry, 2004)

Remember, your best is all you can do!

Preventing Compassion Fatigue

Preparing for Disaster

- Personal preparedness planning
- Match response activities to personal and professional strengths
- Pre-disaster stress assessment to identify workers at risk for compassion fatigue
- Necessary supplies and resources
- Appropriate training and education

Myers & Wee (2002)

Resilience Skills

Preparing for Disaster: Three Cs

- Calm
- Connected
- In Control

(Red River Resilience and American Red Cross, 2011)

Resilience Skills

During Disaster: Three Rs

- Rest
- Routine
- Relationships

(McLean, 2009)

Resilience Skills
During Disaster Recovery: FACTS

- Foster hope
- Act with purpose
- Connect with others
- Take care of yourself
- Search for meaning

(www.RedRiverResilience.com, 2010)
