

An Ounce of Prevention

Complimentary

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Disaster Rescue and Response Workers

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington are, together, the greatest man-made disaster in America since the Civil War. Lessons learned from natural and human-caused disasters can help us understand the unique stressors faced by rescue workers such as police and firefighters, National Guard members, emergency medical technicians, and volunteers. Past experience may also help us recognize how these stressors may *affect* response workers. Rescue workers face the danger of death or physical injury, the potential loss of their coworkers and friends, and devastating effects on their communities. In addition to physical danger, rescue workers are at risk for behavioral and emotional readjustment problems.

What psychological problems can result for rescue workers following disaster experiences?

The psychological problems for workers that may result from disaster experiences include:

- Emotional reactions: temporary (i.e., for several days or a couple of weeks) feelings of shock, fear, grief, anger, resentment, guilt, shame, helplessness, hopelessness, or emotional numbness (difficulty feeling love and intimacy or difficulty taking interest and pleasure in day-to-day activities)
- Cognitive reactions: confusion, disorientation, indecisiveness, worry, shortened attention span, difficulty concentrating, memory loss, unwanted memories, self-blame
- Physical reactions: tension, fatigue, edginess, difficulty sleeping, bodily aches or pain, startling easily, racing heartbeat, nausea, change in appetite, change in sex drive
- Interpersonal reactions in relationships at school, work, in friendships, in marriage, or as a parent: distrust; irritability; conflict; withdrawal; isolation; feeling rejected or abandoned; being distant, judgmental, or over-controlling

What severe stress symptoms can result for disaster workers?

Most disaster rescue workers only experience mild, normal stress reactions, and disaster experiences may even promote personal growth and strengthen relationships. However, as many as one out of every three rescue workers experience some or all of the following severe stress symptoms, which may lead to lasting Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, or depression:

- Dissociation (feeling completely unreal or outside yourself, like in a dream; having "blank" periods of time you cannot remember)
- Intrusive re-experiencing (terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks)
- Extreme attempts to avoid disturbing memories (such as through substance use)
- Extreme emotional numbing (completely unable to feel emotion, as if empty)
- Hyperarousal (panic attacks, rage, extreme irritability, intense agitation)
- Severe anxiety (paralyzing worry, extreme helplessness, compulsions, or obsessions)
- Severe depression (complete loss of hope, self-worth, motivation, or purpose in life)

Who is at greatest risk for severe stress symptoms?

Rescue workers who directly experience or witness any of the following during or after the disaster are at greatest risk for severe stress symptoms and lasting readjustment problems:

- Life threatening danger or physical harm (especially to children)
- Exposure to gruesome death, bodily injury, or dead or maimed bodies
- Extreme environmental or human violence or destruction
- Loss of home, valued possessions, neighborhood, or community
- Loss of communication with or support from close relations
- Intense emotional demands (such as searching for possibly dying survivors or interacting with bereaved family members)

- Extreme fatigue, weather exposure, hunger, or sleep deprivation
- Extended exposure to danger, loss, emotional/physical strain
- Exposure to toxic contamination (such as gas or fumes, chemicals, radioactivity)

Studies also show that some individuals are at a higher than typical risk for severe stress symptoms and lasting PTSD if they have a history of:

- Exposure to other traumas (such as severe accidents, abuse, assault, combat, rescue work)
- Chronic medical illness or psychological disorders
- Chronic poverty, homelessness, unemployment, or discrimination
- Recent or subsequent major life stressors or emotional strain (such as single parenting)

Disaster stress may revive memories of prior trauma and may intensify pre-existing social, economic, spiritual, psychological, or medical problems.

How can you manage stress during a disaster operation?

Here are some ways to manage stress during a disaster operation:

- Develop a "buddy" system with a coworker.
- Encourage and support your coworkers.
- Take care of yourself physically by exercising regularly and eating small quantities of food frequently.
- Take a break when you feel your stamina, coordination, or tolerance for irritation diminishing.
- Stay in touch with family and friends.
- Defuse briefly whenever you experience troubling incidents and after each work shift.

How can you manage stress after the disaster?

After the disaster:

- Attend a debriefing if one is offered, or try to get one organized two to five days after leaving the scene.
- Talk about feelings as they arise, and be a good listener to your coworkers.
- Don't take anger too personally - it's often an expression of frustration, guilt, or worry.
- Give your coworkers recognition and appreciation for a job well done.
- Eat well and try to get adequate sleep in the days following the event.
- Maintain as normal a routine as possible, but take several days to "decompress" gradually.

How can you manage stress after returning home?

After returning home:

- Catch up on your rest (this may take several days).
- Slow down. Get back to a normal pace in your daily life.
- Understand that it's perfectly normal to want to talk about the disaster and equally normal not to want to talk about it; but remember that those who haven't been through it might not be interested in hearing all about it - they might find it frightening or simply be satisfied that you returned safely.
- Expect disappointment, frustration, and conflict - sometimes coming home doesn't live up to what you imagined it would be - but keep recalling what's really important in your life and relationships so that small stressors don't lead to major conflicts.
- Don't be surprised if you experience mood swings; they will diminish with time.
- Don't overwhelm children with your experiences; be sure to talk about what happened in their lives while you were gone.
- If talking doesn't feel natural, other forms of expression or stress relief such as journal writing, hobbies, and exercise are recommended.

Taking each day one at a time is essential in disaster's wake. Each day provides a new opportunity to **FILL-UP**:

- **Focus Inwardly** on what's most important to you and your family today.

- **Look and Listen** to learn what you and your significant others are experiencing, so you'll remember what is important and let go of what's not.
- **Understand Personally** what these experiences mean to you, so that you will feel able to go on with your life and even grow personally.

~Bruce H. Young, LCSW, Julian D. Ford, PhD, and Patricia J. Watson, PhD

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/early/disaster-rescue-response.asp>

Common Reactions After Trauma

After going through a trauma, survivors often say that their first feeling is relief to be alive. This may be followed by stress, fear, and anger. Trauma survivors may also find they are unable to stop thinking about what happened. Many survivors will show a high level of arousal, which causes them to react strongly to sounds and sights around them.

Most people have some kind of stress reaction after a trauma. Having such a reaction has nothing to do with personal weakness. Stress reactions may last for several days or even a few weeks. For most people, if symptoms occur, they will slowly decrease over time.

What are common reactions to trauma?

All kinds of trauma survivors commonly experience stress reactions. This is true for veterans, children, and disaster rescue or relief workers. If you understand what is happening when you or someone you know reacts to a traumatic event, you may be less fearful and better able to handle things.

Reactions to a trauma may include:

- Feeling hopeless about the future
- Feeling detached or unconcerned about others
- Having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling jumpy and getting startled easily at sudden noises
- Feeling on guard and constantly alert
- Having disturbing dreams and memories or flashbacks
- Having work or school problems

You may also experience more physical reactions such as:

- Stomach upset and trouble eating
- Trouble sleeping and feeling very tired
- Pounding heart, rapid breathing, feeling edgy
- Sweating
- Severe headache if thinking of the event
- Failure to engage in exercise, diet, safe sex, regular health care
- Excess smoking, alcohol, drugs, food
- Having your ongoing medical problems get worse

You may have more emotional troubles such as:

- Feeling nervous, helpless, fearful, sad
- Feeling shocked, numb, and not able to feel love or joy
- Avoiding people, places, and things related to the event
- Being irritable or having outbursts of anger
- Becoming easily upset or agitated
- Blaming yourself or having negative views of oneself or the world
- Distrust of others, getting into conflicts, being over-controlling
- Being withdrawn, feeling rejected, or abandoned
- Loss of intimacy or feeling detached

Recovery from stress reactions

Turn to your family and friends when you are ready to talk. They are your personal support system. Recovery is an ongoing gradual process. It doesn't happen through suddenly being "cured" and it doesn't mean that you will forget what happened. Most people will recover from trauma naturally. If your stress reactions are getting in the way of your relationships, work, or other important activities, you may want to talk to a counselor or your doctor. Good treatments are available.

Common problems that can occur after a trauma

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition that can develop after you have gone through a life-threatening event. If you have PTSD, you may have trouble keeping yourself from thinking over and over about what happened to you. You may try to avoid people and places that remind you of the trauma. You may feel numb. Lastly, if you have PTSD, you might find that you have trouble relaxing. You may startle easily and you may feel on guard most of the time.

Depression. Depression involves feeling down or sad more days than not. If you are depressed, you may lose interest in activities that used to be enjoyable or fun. You may feel low in energy and

be overly tired. You may feel hopeless or in despair, and you may think that things will never get better. Depression is more likely when you have had losses such as the death of close friends. If you are depressed, at times you might think about hurting or killing yourself. For this reason, getting help for depression is very important.

Self-blame, guilt and shame. Sometimes in trying to make sense of a traumatic event, you may blame yourself in some way. You may think you are responsible for bad things that happened, or for surviving when others didn't. You may feel guilty for what you did or did not do. Remember, we all tend to be our own worst critics. Most of the time, that guilt, shame, or self-blame is not justified.

Suicidal thoughts. Trauma and personal loss can lead a depressed person to think about hurting or killing themselves. If you think someone you know may be feeling suicidal, you should directly ask them. You will NOT put the idea in their head. If someone is thinking about killing themselves, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) You can also call a counselor, doctor, or 911.

Anger or aggressive behavior. Trauma can be connected with anger in many ways. After a trauma, you might think that what happened to you was unfair or unjust. You might not understand why the event happened and why it happened to you. These thoughts can result in intense anger. Although anger is a natural and healthy emotion, intense feelings of anger and aggressive behavior can cause problems with family, friends, or co-workers. If you become violent when angry, you just make the situation worse. Violence can lead to people being injured, and there may be legal consequences.

Alcohol/Drug abuse. Drinking or "self-medicating" with drugs is a common, and unhealthy, way of coping with upsetting events. You may drink too much or use drugs to numb yourself and to try to deal with difficult thoughts, feelings, and memories related to the trauma. While using alcohol or drugs may offer a quick solution, it can actually lead to more problems. If someone close begins to lose control of drinking or drug use, you should try to get them to see a health care provider about managing their drinking or drug use.

Summing it all up. Right after a trauma, almost every survivor will find himself or herself unable to stop thinking about what happened. Stress reactions, such as increased fear, nervousness, jumpiness, upsetting memories, and efforts to avoid reminders, will gradually decrease over time for most people.

Use your personal support systems, family and friends, when you are ready to talk. Recovery is an ongoing gradual process. It doesn't happen through suddenly being "cured" and it doesn't mean that you will forget what happened. Most people will recover from trauma naturally over time. If your emotional reactions are getting in the way of your relationships, work, or other important activities, you may want to talk to a counselor or your doctor. Good treatments are available.

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/problems/common-reactions-after-trauma.asp>

EMDR Therapy is an empirically validated treatment of trauma and other adverse life experiences.

Contact the office for more information.

Net News

Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful.

How to Stop Disrespecting Your Children

<http://kindredmedia.org/2016/04/how-to-stop-disrespecting-your-children/#comment-287037>

Meditation Plus Running as a Treatment for Depression

<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/meditation-plus-running-as-a-treatment-for-depression/?r=0>

For information or links to health tips, visit:

www.canadian-health-network.ca

Parents, The Anti-Drug Website:

www.theantidrug.com/advice/

Self- Help Corner:

Alcoholics Anonymous: 780-424-5900

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Al-Anon/Alateen: 780-433-1818

Support Network / Referral Line: 211

Distress Line: 482-4357

Cocaine Anonymous: 780-425-2715