Addressing Disaster and Emergency Stress Beyond First Responders:
Implications for Individuals, Families and the Workplace

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Faculty

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Program Objectives

- Identify the nature of stressors for disaster workers who are not first responders.
- List the individual, family and workplace impacts of these stressors.
- Describe potential strategies for reducing and/or intervening stress reactions.

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster and when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.

-Nietzche

Overview

- Part I - Who are we talking about?
- Part II - Nature of the stressors
- Part III - Signs of stress
- Part IV - Strategies

Disaster Work

Wonderful!	Stressful!
Rewarding!	Frustrating!
Challenging!	Exhausting!
Satisfying!	Dangerous!

Part I - Who Are We Talking About?

We Are Talking About…

- Workers other than traditional first responders

- Workers themselves, families of workers, coworkers/supervisors of disaster workers

- More specifically….

Workers Deployed To The Disaster Site

- Federal: FEMA, NDMS, CDC epi, FDA, Agriculture, Corps of Engineers, SAMHSA, others
- State/Local: health (epi, food/water/waste, public information), highways, utilities, social services, mutual aid
- Contractors: Infrastructure assessment/repair, debris removal, food/water/ice delivery, others
- Volunteer: Faith based organizations, ARC, others

Workers Who Are Deployed To A Site Other Than The Impacted Area

- Workers deployed to command centers
- Workers assigned to supply centers
- State/County mutual aid workers

Workers Who Remain At Their Usual Workplace But Assume Different / Additional Duties Related To The Disaster

- Government workers

- Business

- Civic/religious leaders

- School personnel

Examples From The Workplace

- Coworkers

- Supervisors

- Employees

- Clients/customers/patients/students

Examples Of Family Members

- Spouses
- Children
- Parents
- Partners
- Close friends

Part II - Nature Of The Stressors

- Environmental factors
- Job role stressors
- Personal stressors

Environmental Factors

- Dislocation to new place
- Climate (cold, hot, wet, smoke, etc.)
- Living conditions
- Sensory impact (e.g., sights, smells, sounds)

Job Role Stressors

- Long hours
- Unfamiliar context
- New challenges
- Time pressures
- Multiple/conflicting priorities
- Exposure to traumatic experiences
- Unclear duration
- Fear of death/injury/illness
- Balancing science with bureaucracy and politics
- Response of those you are helping
- Organizational (inter- & intra-) conflict

Personal Stressors

- Overwork/fatigue
- Change in eating/drinking
- Factors adversely impacting health
- Interpersonal conflict
- Highly emotional experiences
- Existential conflict
- Role conflict

Part III - Signs Of Stress

- Physical
- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Behavioral
- Spiritual

Physical

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Fine motor tremors
- Tics or muscle twitches
- Paresthesia (e.g., numbness and tingling in extremities)
- Profuse sweating
- Dizziness
- Stomach or Gastro-intestinal upset
- Heart Palpitations/ fluttering
- Choking or smothering sensation

Emotional

- Anxiety, fear
- Grief, guilt, self-doubt, sadness
- Irritability, anger, resentment, increased conflicts with friends/family
- Feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, despair, depressed
- Anticipation of harm to self or others
- Isolation or social withdrawal
- Insomnia
- Hyper-vigilance
- Crying easily
- Gallows/morbid humor

Cognitive

- Memory loss, anomia (difficulty naming objects or people)
- Calculation difficulties; decision making difficulties
- Confusion in general and/or confusing trivial with major issues
- Concentration problems/distractibility
- Reduced attention span and/or preoccupation with disaster

Behavioral

- Sleep problems
- Over- under-eating
- Gait change
- Startle reactions
- Ritualistic behavior
- Substance abuse

Spiritual

- Crisis of faith ("How could God let this happen?")
- Anger toward God
- Cynicism

Longer Term Effects

- Nightmares
- Intrusive thoughts
- Uncontrolled affect
- Relationship problems
- Job/school related problems
- Decreased libido/sexual interest
- Overly critical, blaming
- Decreased immune response

Stress In The Family

- Before
- During
- After

Stress In The Family - Before

- Anger about deployment
- Anger about remaining family member's added responsibility
- Fear on every side
- Strong emotions resulting from uncertainty about initiation, nature, and duration of deployment
- Denial

Stress In The Family - During

- Fatigue and frustration over added responsibilities
- Fear for safety of loved ones
- Discomfort with new roles
- Disappointment over missed events/obligations/landmarks

Stress In The Family - After

- Reasserting old roles
- Fatigue on all sides
- Conflicting expectations
- Balancing work/family reentry
- Stress reactions on all sides

Stress In The Workplace

- Before
- During
- After

Stress In The Workplace - Before

- Planning/negotiating workload shifts
- Having fewer people to do the work
- Disasters never come at "good" times
- Planning and preparedness takes resources away from ongoing work

Stress In The Workplace - During

- Managing changed/expanded workloads/reporting relationships
- Keeping up with the work
- Politics/criticism
- Potential loss of expertise
- Uncertain duration (or repeat) of deployment
- Perception ("He's out doing interesting things while we are stuck here doing his job!")

Stress In The Workplace - After

- Working slowly
- Missing deadlines
- Calling in sick frequently
- Absenteeism
- Irritability and anger
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Appearing numb or emotionless
- Withdrawal from work activity

Stress In The Workplace - After

- Withdrawal from work activity
- Overworking
- Forgetting directives, procedures, and requests
- Difficulty with work transitions or changes in routines
- Perception ("nobody knows what I went through")

Part IV - Strategies

- For individuals
- For the workplace
- For families

Strategies For Individuals - Before

- Self-care
- Anticipate issues
- Knowing you strengths and vulnerabilities
- Get physically, emotionally, and vocationally prepared
- Train for disaster role

Strategies For Individuals - During

- Reasonable work hours
- Rest/sleep
- Diet
- Exercise
- Real or symbolic contact with home
- Private time
- Talk to somebody who understands
- Have a trusted monitor/self-monitor
- Limit alcohol
- Have an end point

Strategies For Individuals - During

- Self-care
- Use the buddy system
- Advocate for your needs
- Record your experiences and your reactions
- Reduce stressful stimuli as much as possible
- Seek help if needed

After Disaster Work… First Things First

- Rest/sleep
- Time with friends and families
- Attention to health concerns
- Completing undone daily personal tasks (e.g., pay bills, mow lawns, shop for groceries, etc.)
- Initial reflection upon what the experience has meant personally and professionally

Strategies For Individuals - After

- Advocate/negotiate for your reentry needs
- Be tolerant and understanding of others
- Talk about your experience if that is helpful
- Show appreciation to others
- Resume normal routine as quickly as possible
- Use the experience to help change your life in positive ways
- Get help if needed

Strategies For Families - Before

- Discuss potential of work in disasters, terrorism, WMD events with loved ones
- Seek agreement/consensus on acceptable risk level, conditions of deployment, etc.
- Consider the potential of adverse medical and psychosocial consequences
- Have a family disaster/deployment plan

Strategies For Families - During

- Maintain contact
- Seek/utilize social support
- Maintain structure/routine
- Self-care

Strategies For Families - After: Remember…

- Homecoming is more than an event; it is a process of reconnection for the family and loved one.
- While coming home represents a return to safety, security, and return to "normal", the routines at home are markedly different than life in a disaster zone.

Strategies For Families: Remember…

- In loved one's absence, family members have assumed many roles and functions that may have to now be renegotiated. Be patient during this period.
- Go slowly. Returning loves one and families need time—Time together if possible before exposure to the demands of the larger community—friends, extended family and coworkers.

Strategies For Families

- Talking about disaster experiences is a personal and delicate subject. Listening rather than asking questions is the guiding rule.

Strategies For Families

- Caution: In the disaster environment, it is common to talk about things that may be upsetting to people not directly involved (e.g., dead bodies, graphic images, etc.). Extreme care should be taken by returning family members to assure that relating experiences does not unnecessarily upset or traumatize others…especially children.

Strategies For Families

- Keep the social calendar fairly free and flexible for the first weeks after the homecoming. The loved one may need time to adjust to the local time zone as well as environmental changes such as continuous noise or interruption.

Strategies For Families

- Be patient and understanding children's' reactions and give them time to get reacquainted.
- Remember…The reality of homecoming and reunion seldom match one's fantasies and preconceived scenarios.

Strategies For The Workplace - Before

- Provide a shared sacrifice, mutually supportive, values driven work culture
- Take care in selecting workers for disaster work
- View stress management as a job skill
- Involve all impacted workers in planning

Strategies For The Workplace - Before

- Prepare workers for new roles/experiences (training, orientation, clarity, go-kits, etc.)
- Address stigma and fitness for duty/security clearance, etc., up front
- Integrate EAP, healthcare, supervision, and organizational policy

Strategies For The Workplace - During

- Contact/support/assist workers during deployment
- Provide positive reinforcement
- Range of interventions at any given time
- Interventions that are phase appropriate

Strategies For The Workplace - After

- Meet/talk with returning workers
- Acknowledge roles/contribution of other workers
- Understand and implement psychological first aid
- Be flexible/compassionate
- Informally appraise returning workers
- Screening/referral/monitoring
- Focus on function

Special Considerations…

- Worker is also a victim
  - Greatly intensified stressors
  - Special work and family needs
- Potential family/coworker contamination
  - Credible education/information
  - Available monitoring, assessment, and treatment

Special Considerations…

- Cultural considerations
  - Culture impacts how we experience crisis, expression of emotion, help seeking, understanding…learn it, make it central to preparedness and response

The Goals…

- Optimize workers' contributions in times of disaster and emergency
- Make the deployment as positive as possible for workers, their families, and their usual workplace
- Reduce/eliminate adverse personal, family/social, and occupational consequences

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Upcoming Programs

Toxic Soup or Not?
Hurricane Katrina Through the Lens of Environmental Health Preparedness
Thursday, December 15, 2005
12:00-1:30 p.m. (Central Time)

For complete listing of upcoming programs visit: www.adph.org/alphtn