



A Guide for Emergency Response Workers and their Managers

Engaging in response efforts in the wake of a traumatic event is inevitably stressful for those involved in the emergency response. While the work is personally rewarding and challenging, it also has the potential for affecting responders in harmful ways. The long hours, breadth of needs and demands, ambiguous roles, and exposure to human suffering can adversely affect even the most experienced professional. Too often, the stress experienced by responders is addressed as an afterthought. With a little effort, however, steps can be taken to minimise the effects of stress.

Stress prevention and management should be addressed in two critical contexts: the organisation and the individual. Adopting a preventive perspective allows both workers and organisations to anticipate stressors and shape responses, rather than simply reacting to a crisis when it occurs.

Organisational Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management

1. Provide effective management structure and leadership.

Elements include:

- Clear chain of command and reporting relationships.
- Available and accessible supervisors.
- Disaster orientation for all workers.
- Shifts of no longer than 12 hours, followed by 12 hours off.
- Briefings at the beginning of shifts as workers enter the operation. Shifts should overlap so that outgoing workers brief incoming workers.
- Necessary supplies (e.g., paper, forms, pens, educational materials).
- Communication tools (e.g., mobile phones, radios).

2. Define a clear purpose and goals.

3. Define clear intervention goals and strategies appropriate to the assignment setting.

4. Define roles by function.

5. Orient and train staff with written role descriptions for each assignment setting. When a setting is under the jurisdiction of another agency, inform workers of each agency's role, contact people, and expectations.

6. Nurture team support.

7. Consider creating a buddy system to support and monitor stress reactions. Promote a positive atmosphere of support and tolerance with frequent praise.

8. Develop a plan for stress management. For example:

- Assess workers' functioning regularly.
- Rotate workers among low-, mid-, and high-stress tasks.
- Encourage breaks and time away from assignment.

Adapted from information issued by www.samhsa.gov

