

Coping Tips for Responders

WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN RESOURCES

As an emergency responder, you are unique in that you are repeatedly exposed to extraordinarily stressful events in the normal course of your work. This places you at a higher-than-normal risk for developing stress reactions. Should a pandemic or other large scale emergency occur in West Virginia, you may experience a far greater sense of stress on the job than normal. Becoming fully informed about the impact that such an event may have on you personally and learning how to protect yourself from the emotional toll of events will help you cope with the situations you face daily.

The Stress Cycle

Stress elevates arousal or readiness. Within manageable levels, stress can help sharpen attention and help you cope with threatening situations. However, when stress reaches maximum effect, the gain in performance is lost and performance and health begin to deteriorate. Should stress response be active a long period of time, it can damage the cardiovascular, immune and nervous systems.

Patterns of response to stress varies with each individual. Most people are resilient and experience mild or transient psychological reactions that are short-lived. The stress response becomes a problem when you can't turn it off; it lasts too long; or it interferes with your daily life.

Normal Reactions to Prolonged Disaster Response

- ◆ You may face conflicting demands between work and family responsibilities.
- ◆ You may not want to leave the scene when the work is finished – regardless of whether your relief has arrived.
- ◆ You will likely try to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment, and you may deny the need for rest and recovery time.
- ◆ You will not be untouched by the enormous gravity of the situation, and you will experience sadness, grief, and/or anger.



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Reactions to Monitor

Physical

- ◆ Gastrointestinal problems
- ◆ Headaches, other aches and pains
- ◆ Visual disturbances
- ◆ Weight loss or gain
- ◆ Sweating or chills
- ◆ Tremors or muscle twitching
- ◆ Being easily startled
- ◆ Chronic fatigue or sleep disturbances

Thinking

- ◆ Memory problems
- ◆ Slow thought processes
- ◆ Lack of concentration
- ◆ Difficulty setting priorities or making decisions
- ◆ Disorientation and confusion
- ◆ Loss of objectivity

Emotional

- ◆ Feeling heroic, euphoric or invulnerable
- ◆ Anxiety or fear
- ◆ Apathy
- ◆ Grief
- ◆ Denial
- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Guilt

Social

- ◆ Isolation
- ◆ Blaming
- ◆ Inability to experience pleasure
- ◆ Difficulty in giving or accepting support or help

Families of Response Workers

As the family of a responder, your loved ones will face many challenges in addition to the fears and disruptions that everyone will face during an outbreak. It is important for families to understand that:

- ◆ Responders might be frustrated, tired, worried, irritable, argumentative, restless, emotional, or distressed.
- ◆ Responders might be impatient and less understanding, energetic, optimistic, good-natured, or helpful than usual.
- ◆ Increased emergency workloads (which might be exacerbated by staffing shortages) can make it difficult for responders to communicate regularly with family members.
- ◆ Family members might experience stigmatization or discrimination.

Families of Response Workers

- ◆ Take breaks, eat, hydrate, and leave at the end of your shift.
- ◆ Keep up your normal routine at home.
- ◆ Sleep, eat and drink in moderation.
- ◆ Know where your body holds stress, and what works best to release it.
- ◆ Spend time with loved ones.
- ◆ Do what calms and nourishes you.
- ◆ Control the amount of TV news programs and newspaper exposure.
- ◆ Talk with your co-workers about experiences; get and give support to one another.
- ◆ Try to maintain your sense of humor.
- ◆ Draw strength from faith, family and friends.
- ◆ Ask for help if you need it.