



State of Louisiana

Department of Health and Hospitals
Office of Behavioral Health

STRATEGIES TO HELP MANAGE “RESPONDER” STRESS IN DISASTER EVENTS

TIP#1: The ideal time for taking actions to prevent stress and to strengthen your stress management skills is ***before*** your disaster assignment. Responder stress can be diminished by practicing for the disaster role, developing a personal toolkit of stress management skills, and preparing yourself and your loved ones.

- ✓ Know your job
- ✓ Keep updated Go-kits
- ✓ Live the “disaster-ready” healthy lifestyle
- ✓ Participate in exercises
- ✓ Know the IC System

Practice Stress Management

- ✓ Know your personal signs and know when to seek professional help
- ✓ Create a team culture and buddy system
- ✓ Select/practice ways to release stress
- ✓ Develop plan with loved ones
- ✓ Identify your major stressors and plan how you will address them
- ✓ Take time for yourself
- ✓ Practice healthy sleep behaviors
- ✓ Stay connected

TIP#2: During the impact phase of a disaster event, the focus of stress management shifts to handling the real-time stressors of the removal from harm and recovery.

- ✓ Activate personal disaster plan
- ✓ Practice self-awareness; Reduce physical tension
- ✓ Take regular breaks
- ✓ Avoid over-identifying with survivors’ grief and trauma.
- ✓ Protect yourself/suit-up properly
- ✓ Limit time working in high-intensity settings
- ✓ Check-in with teammates regularly
- ✓ Spend time relaxing with family and others while off-duty

Signs you are experiencing stress... Common signs that you may be experiencing stress, and that your stress level is becoming harmful: (*Hint: You may be able to “see” these stress signs better in your teammates than in yourself.*)

Bodily sensations and physical effects

Rapid heart rate, palpitations, muscle tension, headaches, tremors, gastrointestinal distress, nausea, inability to relax when off duty, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, nightmares or flashbacks

Strong negative feelings

Fear or terror in life-threatening situations or perceived danger, anger, frustration, argumentativeness, irritability, deep sadness, difficulty maintaining emotional balance

Difficulty thinking clearly

Disorientation or confusion, difficulty problem-solving and making decisions, difficulty remembering instructions, inability to see situations clearly, distortion and misinterpretation of comments and events

Problematic or risky behaviors

Unnecessary risk-taking, failure to use personal protective equipment, refusal to follow orders or leave the scene, endangerment of team members, increased use or misuse of prescription drugs or alcohol

Social conflicts

Irritability, anger and hostility, blaming, reduced ability to support teammates, conflicts with peers or family, withdrawal, isolation

TIP#3: Coping with Compassion Fatigue

By focusing on building your strengths and carrying out self-care activities, you are contributing to your behavioral, cognitive, physical, spiritual, and emotional resilience. The following strategies can help you do just that – Focus on the four core components of resilience:

- a. Adequate sleep, or at least quality rest
- b. Good nutrition, Drink enough fluids to stay hydrated, and eat quality food
- c. Regular physical activity, and
- d. Active relaxation (e.g., yoga or meditation)

TIP#4: After Your Response Assignment

Stress Management When Response Extends Into the Recovery Phase

- ✓ *Recognize* that when you are working at a disaster scene with severely limited resources, your personal stress may increase.
- ✓ *Know* where to refer survivors.
- ✓ *Conserve energy.*
- ✓ *Take time away* from the scene.
- ✓ *Use stress management skills* like deep breathing as often as you can.
- ✓ *Focus on reintegration* with friends, loved ones, and coworkers who did not share the experience with you.