

Mental Health Implications of Emergencies & Self Care for Responders

**OFFICE OF MENTAL HEALTH DISASTER
PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE**

**Division of Mental Hygiene
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene**

Amanda E. Lehrer, M.S.W



Course Objective:

- The Mental Health Implications of Emergencies
- Normal and Abnormal Stress Reactions
- Self Care



The Psychological Effect of Disasters

- Disasters are traumatic events which affect the psychosocial functioning of individuals and overwhelm communities



The Psychological Effect of Disasters

- No one who experiences a disaster is untouched by it
- Most psychological reactions to disasters are normal reactions to an abnormal situation
- Most individuals will use positive coping skills to adapt to situations created by disasters

Normal Stress Response

- Most people exposed to a disaster will show some stress reaction in the immediate and short-term aftermath
- Most of these are normal reactions

The “Five Ways” Individuals Respond to Disasters

Physical: Body reactions

- Fatigue
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Weakness
- Nausea
- Thirst
- Muscular tremors
- Profuse sweating
- Chills
- Chest pains
- Difficulty breathing
- Rapid heart rate

Emotional: Feelings

- Anxiety
- Numbness
- Fear
- Irritability
- Anger
- Agitation
- Guilt
- Denial
- Grief
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Depression

Cognitive: Thinking and Decision Making

- Confusion
- Blaming someone
- Poor attention
- Memory problems
- Poor problem solving ability
- Raised/lower alertness
- Difficulty identifying familiar objects
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks/intrusive images

Behavioral: Actions

- Withdrawal
- Suspiciousness
- Restlessness
- Increased alcohol or substance use
- Loss/increased appetite
- Emotional outburst
- Argumentativeness
- Nonspecific body complains
- Erratic movements
- Increased/decreased sexual drive

Spiritual: Beliefs and values

- Anger at God
- Feeling distant from God
- Belief that God doesn't care
- Sudden turn towards God
- Withdrawal from place of worship
- Loss of meaning and purpose
- Questioning one's basic beliefs



Abnormal Stress Response

- Some individuals may have persisting stress reactions, or their symptoms may become worse over time
- **For mental health referrals call LIFENE, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day at 1800-LIFENET**

Volunteer Preparedness

Psychological First Aid (PFA)

- PFA is as necessary and accessible as medical first aid
- May help alleviate these stress reactions



Providing Psychological First Aid

To Promote:

SAFETY

CALM

CONNECTEDNESS

HOPE

SELF-EFFICACY

Promote SAFETY

- Help people meet basic needs for food and shelter, and obtain emergency medical attention
- Provide repeated, simple, and accurate information on how to obtain these



Promote CALM

- Listen to people who wish to share their stories and emotions
- Be friendly and compassionate
- Offer accurate information about the disaster or emergency



Promote **CONNECTEDNESS**

- Help people contact friends or loved ones
- Keep families together
- Keep children with parents or other close relatives whenever possible



Promote HOPE

- Remind people that more help and services are on the way
- Direct people to the services which are available



Promote SELF-EFFICACY

- Give practical suggestions that steer people towards helping themselves
- Engage people in meeting their own needs



Psychological First Aid

Don'ts

- Don't force people to share their stories
- Don't tell people what they should be feeling, thinking or doing
- Don't make promises that you cannot keep
- Don't criticize existing services or relief activities in front of people in need of these services

Self Care for Volunteer Responders

Why it is Important for you?

- Being a volunteer responder can be inherently stressful

THEREFORE

To perform your tasks safely and effectively you must monitor and care for your own physical and mental well-being.

Self Care:

What to do during your shift?

- Work with your supervisor to prioritize tasks
- Plan for regular breaks for eating and resting
- Should you need additional breaks, let your supervisor know

Self Care: Positive Coping Tips

- Take care of your body
- Take care of your spiritual needs
- Manage your work load
- Keep to a routine
- Avoid excessive drinking, smoking and drugs
- Reduce your tension: meditate, exercise, listen to music, take a bath



Self Care: Positive Coping Tips

- Reach out to family, friends, coworkers or mental health professionals
- Give yourself permission and time to react to the disaster
- Eat healthy, regular meals and avoid junk food



When to Seek Professional Help?

- A person witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event should consider seeking professional help if the symptoms of stress worsen or persist more than one month

Symptoms of Stress

- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed
- Restlessness or irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that don't respond to treatment
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feeling guilty, hopeless, or worthless
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Mental Health Referrals

- **If you feel overwhelmed reach out, ask for help**
- **For mental health referrals call LifeNet, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day at 1-800-LifeNet**
- **1-212-982-5284 (TTY)**

- All volunteer responders who are aware of the mental health effects of emergencies can help to alleviate the extreme psychological reactions to the situation

Amanda Lehrer, M.S.W

Office of Mental Health Disaster Preparedness and
Response

New York City Department of Health and Mental
Hygiene

Office- 212.219.5042

alehrer@health.nyc.gov

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/mhdpr/mhdpr.shtm>

