



# Tips for Disaster Responders:

## RETURNING TO WORK

### INTRODUCTION

Disaster responders make valuable contributions to communities across the nation. Whether you work on the front lines or behind the scenes during a disaster response assignment, you provide essential services to those who need them. Disaster response work is both stressful and rewarding, and it provides a unique perspective for everyone involved. The stress created by this experience can sometimes cause adjustment difficulties for disaster responders returning to work. This tip sheet can help ease your transition back to routine work.

### STRESS PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT

#### Strengthening Stress Management Skills

While it is a good idea to take some time to reorient yourself and get sufficient sleep after a disaster assignment, some experts suggest that responders first go back to work for a day or two to get reacquainted with their colleagues and responsibilities, and then take some personal time off. This may help ease any anxiety about possible unknowns awaiting you at work. The flexibility and amount of personal time varies by employer, so check the policies

of your workplace or consult with your human resources representative for guidance.

Because work conditions in disaster response are not ideal, you may have difficulty taking proper care of yourself during this time. When your disaster response assignment is over, it is especially important to focus on addressing your basic needs. For example, ensuring that you are physically healthy can increase your resilience and decrease the effects of trauma exposure. To prevent and manage your stress, practice the following self-care tips:

- Maintain a healthy diet, and get routine exercise and adequate rest.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Pay attention to health concerns.
- Catch up on neglected personal tasks (e.g., check mail, pay bills, mow the lawn, shop for groceries).
- Reflect upon what the experience has meant personally and professionally, for both you and your loved ones.
- Make sure you and your loved ones have a preparedness plan.

## Expecting the Unexpected—Common Difficulties and Tips for Coping With Them

When transitioning from your disaster assignment to your routine duties, you may notice changes in yourself, your coworkers, or your work environment. A few potential difficulties are described below, along with some tips on how to overcome them.

**Pace change.** The disaster response environment often moves at a pace much faster than that of the normal workplace, and you may find that you have grown accustomed to this rapid pace. When returning to your routine work, it may appear as though people are moving at a much slower pace than you remember. It is easy to misinterpret this behavior. Remember, it is probably you who have changed, not your colleagues. **Try to refrain from judging, criticizing, or making assumptions about your colleagues' work pace.**

**Unrelenting fatigue.** Sometimes excessive stress results in never feeling rested. You often experience extreme fatigue when you first return from your assignment, even if you feel like you are getting a sufficient amount of sleep. This may be a result of several factors, such as the stress hormones moving out of your body and allowing



you to relax, or your body trying to recover. **You may need more rest than you realize.** If extreme fatigue persists for more than 2 weeks, consider seeing a physician. See the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet for more information on finding support and services.

**Cynicism.** During disaster work you often see the worst in individuals and systems, and it is easy to become cynical. These feelings are expected and usually diminish over time. **Review the successes and positive results from your assignment, and try to focus on seeing the best in individuals and systems. Over time, this perspective will help you maintain a more optimistic outlook.**

**Dissatisfaction with routine work.** Saving lives and protecting our fellow citizens' health and safety can be rewarding and energizing, and most work does not provide such dramatic and immediate reinforcement. When you first return to your regular job, you might feel as though your daily work lacks the same level of meaning and satisfaction. These feelings are common among those who alternate between high-stress environments, such as disaster work, and more traditional professional settings. To counter these feelings, incorporate the positive things you have learned during disaster response into your personal and professional life. **Recognize that everyone has a job to do and that even the smallest effort contributes to our well-being. Learn to appreciate your routine work as well as everyone else's.**

**Easily evoked emotions.** Sometimes the combination of intense experiences, fatigue, and stress leaves you vulnerable to unexpected emotions. For example, you may cry more easily than before, be quick to anger, or experience

dramatic mood swings. These are fairly common reactions among disaster responders that typically subside over time. ***In the meantime, be aware of your reactions; discuss your experiences with trusted coworkers, friends, and loved ones; and try to limit comments that might be hurtful or upsetting to others.***

**Relating your experiences.** While you may want to share your experiences with others, some information may be too difficult for others to hear. ***Exercise care when discussing your disaster response experiences and know that it can be harmful to others to hear you describe disturbing scenes.*** Make sure to refrain from talking about the negative aspects of the work while in the presence of children or others who are emotionally vulnerable. Children are also strongly affected by how their parents cope with traumatic stress. The better you are able to use positive coping skills and address your experiences in a positive manner, the more likely your family will do so as well.

**Difficulties with colleagues and supervisors.** You may not experience a “welcome back” from your colleagues and supervisors that meets your expectations. Your coworkers may resent the additional workloads they had in your absence or not understand the difficult nature of the work you did. They also may resent the recognition that you are receiving as a responder. ***To cope with any negative feelings you may have about your colleagues, try to express appreciation for their support during your assignment, and take care in relating your experiences.***

**Cultural differences.** Culture affects how an individual reacts to intense experiences. Some colleagues may want to celebrate you, others may feel you need caretaking, and others may decide that you need time on your own. ***Find***



***ways to express your needs so that you are true to yourself but also sensitive to your team members' efforts to be supportive.***

## When To Seek Help

Stress is an anticipated reaction to situations like disasters and other traumatic events. Sometimes it may be difficult to determine whether your symptoms are a result of a physical illness, stress, or a combination of the two. You may need more support, however, if you experience any of the symptoms below or have other concerns that persist for more than 2 weeks:

- Disorientation (e.g., appearing dazed, experiencing memory loss, being unable to give the date or time or recall recent events)

- Depression (e.g., continuing sadness, withdrawing from others)
- Anxiety (e.g., feeling constantly on edge or restless; having obsessive fear of another disaster)
- Acute psychiatric symptoms (e.g., hearing voices, experiencing delusional thinking)
- Inability to care for oneself (e.g., not eating, bathing, or handling day-to-day life tasks)
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts or plans; pervasive feelings of hopelessness or despair
- Problematic use or misuse of alcohol, prescription medication, or other drugs
- Domestic violence, child abuse, or elder abuse

If you are experiencing consistent or severe stress, there are several things you can do. You can check to see if your employer provides access to an Employee Assistance Program (or “EAP”). You may also choose to contact your primary care physician who can help to rule out a medical problem or provide a referral to a licensed mental health professional. You can also download SAMHSA’s new Disaster Behavioral Health App and access resources specific to the post-deployment phase, including tips for re-entry (for responders, supervisors, and family members). Additional supports and services can be found in the **Helpful Resources** section below.

## Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)  
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515  
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App  
Website: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP13-DKAPP-1>

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs\*  
National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)  
PTSD Information Voicemail: 1-802-296-6300  
Website: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov>

U.S. Department of Homeland Security: FirstResponder.gov\*  
Website: <http://www.firstresponder.gov>

Federal Occupational Health\*  
Employee Assistance Program for Federal and Federalized Employees  
Toll-Free: 1-800-222-0364  
TTY: 1-888-262-7848  
Website: <http://www.foh.hhs.gov/>

*\*Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

### Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator  
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)  
TDD: 1-866-889-2647  
Website: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator>

MentalHealth.gov  
Website: <http://www.mentalhealth.gov>  
*MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.*

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator  
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)  
(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889  
Website: <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

### Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)  
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)  
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov>  
*This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.*

SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline  
Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 Text “TalkWithUs” to 66746  
Website: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

