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Individual Resilience: Factsheet for Responders

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Emergency responders know that disasters and emergencies can cause great destruction to infrastructure and damage people's physical health. It can be challenging for responders to anticipate the behavioral health consequences of disasters for victims and for the responders themselves. This is because the emotional effects of disaster may not be seen in the tangible ways physical injuries might be. Effective coping with disaster has a lot to do with a responder's individual resilience.

What is individual resilience?

Individual resilience involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that promote personal wellbeing and mental health. It refers to a person's ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity. People can learn coping skills to adapt to stress and maintain or return to a state of mental health wellbeing.

A disaster can impair resilience, even for experienced responders, due to stress, traumatic exposure, distressing psychological reactions, and disrupted social networks. Feelings of grief, sadness, and a range of other emotions are common after traumatic events. Resilient individuals, however, are able to work through the emotions and effects of stress and painful events and rebuild their lives.

Why is responder resilience so important?

When responders have the tools and support that they need to take care of themselves and manage stress, the team as a whole will be more effective. Resilient responders are better able to fulfill the requirements of the response.

Unaddressed responder stress can have a negative effect on others. Stress can lead to poor decisions and increase mistakes that might jeopardize the success of the mission and the safety of others.

Resilient responders are better able to:

- Care for themselves and others.
- Access needed resources more efficiently and effectively.
- Be physically and mentally healthier and have overall lower recovery expenses and service needs.
- Miss fewer days of work.
- Get back to routines more quickly (which helps family members as well).
- Work through the strong emotions that come from being a responder, without relying on unhealthy coping strategies such as drinking heavily or smoking.
- Return to their day-to-day role and have positive interactions with co-workers and family.
- Have greater job satisfaction and career longevity.

What contributes to individual resilience?

Resilience develops as individuals learn better strategies to manage stress and life's challenges. Building resilience involves tapping into personal strengths and the support of family, colleagues, and friends. Responders can foster individual resilience during pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment phases. Here are some examples:

Pre-Deployment:

- Educate yourself and your colleagues about the behavioral health impacts of working in disaster environments.
- Plan for how you will cope with response & post-response stress.
- Talk with family & friends about how they can support you.
- Use healthy stress management strategies everyday, not just when stress is at its highest.
- Engage in community activities for enjoyment and to build social connections.
- Exercise daily and use simple routines you can do even when deployed (running, stretching etc.).
- Develop and maintain healthy eating habits.
- Have a bedtime routine that you can maintain when deployed.
- Identify people that are positive influences who can provide support during times of stress, even if you can only keep in touch online.
- Find what brings you positive feelings or enjoyment, such as a favorite book or movie. Keep it on hand for when you return from a response to help tap into positive emotions.

During deployment/response phase:

- Seek support or suggestions from staff assigned to provide responder behavioral health support.
- Take regular breaks and do your best not to work over expected shift lengths.
- Reach out to family, friends, or colleagues to get support.
- Maintain an exercise routine to help release stress.
- Eat healthy and make sure you get adequate sleep.
- Rotate job tasks before stress impacts performance.

During post-deployment phase:

- Learn about potential challenges of returning from a deployment and share them with your family and friends.
- Get screened for stress or behavioral health needs. Use your employee assistance program or other resources, like the SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990 or Text TalkWithUs to 66746) which provides free, confidential support to disaster survivors and responders.
- Use strategies that you identified before your deployment.

Resources

- SAMHSA Disaster Distress Line
- SAMHSA Disaster App
- Psychological First Aid: A Guide for Emergency & Disaster Response Workers
- A Guide to Managing Stress in Crisis Response Professions
- Tips for Disaster Responders: Identifying Substance Misuse in the Responder Community
- Tips for Disaster Responders: Preventing and Managing Stress
- Returning Home After Disaster Relief Work
- A Post-Deployment Guide for Families of Emergency & Disaster Response Workers

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