

Responders Stress and Self-care During a Disaster or Emergency

During a disaster or emergency response, while working with those impacted by the event, you will see people coming together to support one another, working collaboratively, and doing what's needed when called upon. You may also potentially experience a combination of long working hours, a lack of a clear job description, poor communication and organization. All these factors can contribute to increased levels of stress. Many people will have periods when stress levels are high and their ability to cope is low. It's during times like this when you need to be actively involved in your own self-care and discuss your feelings with someone you trust.

Responders may experience similar reactions as the survivors as a result of their constant exposure and concern for those individuals impacted by the disaster.

There are normal displays of stress resulting from this type of work:

Compassion fatigue (also known as vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress): A reduced ability to engage with others while at the same time emotionally feeling their burdens.

Caregiver burden or Over-care: This occurs when genuine care becomes stressful and you experience feelings such as anger, frustration, impatience, worry or sadness. It can decrease your capacity to handle challenging situations – you can become less flexible and resilient under pressure. You can have less stamina and be less creative with problem solving. Over-care can lead to feelings like: anxiety, burnout, fatigue, giving up, apathy (indifference) or not caring anymore.

Burnout: Is the result of working in stressful conditions with challenging clients and a lack of support. You begin to feel exhausted, dislike your job, become cynical, resent others, and lose kindness and compassion for people who have been impacted by an event. Burnout develops gradually due to the accumulation of stress and the intensity of contact with people you are helping. It can undermine a responders sense of optimism and can affect your relationships.

An important part of being an effective responder is to engage in self-audits before, during and after a disaster response. A self-audit is examining your personal life and activities so you can assess current strengths and weaknesses for responding in a high stress work environment. Most people never take the time to understand how this type of work affects them emotionally, but part of being an effective responder is to know and predict personal risk factors that may create challenges for you.

Signs of Stress

Physical

- shock
- palpitations
- jumpiness
- fatigue
- digestive or intestinal problems
- dizziness
- headaches
- aches and pains

Cognitive

- poor judgement
- trouble concentrating
- negative thinking

Emotional

- anxiety
- helplessness
- moodiness
- feeling overwhelmed
- anger
- hypersensitivity or insensitivity to emotional reactions of others

Behavioural

- irritable or short tempered
- sleep disturbances
- using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to cope

Spiritual

- questioning life's purpose and meaning
- shifts in faith practices and rituals
- questioning of basic beliefs

Interpersonal

- withdrawal
- isolation
- increased dependency on others



Self-care Tips

Self-care is critical to the wellbeing and effectiveness of disaster responders and should be a personal priority. There are a few strategies that can be incorporated into your routine when responding:

- Pace yourself, try to balance the number of hours you work per week and set a pace that allows for breaks and time off.
- Make time for outside interests, personal time, and recreation.
- Maintain your health by getting adequate sleep, eating regular meals, being active and practicing stress management/ relaxation techniques.
- Identify your support people ahead of time.
 - Talk to a trusted co-worker, supervisor, or friend – use a ‘buddy’ (peer support) system.
 - Maintain social connections- schedule time to meet with friends & family outside of work/ volunteering.
- Recognize your accomplishments and those of your team. Recall the positive moments—how you felt when you helped someone or received positive feedback.
- Use humour— laughter can reduce your stress and relieve tension.
- If you find yourself experiencing some anxiety or distress remember to reach out and ask for support.

For information and resources about responding to, and recovering from a disaster or emergency, visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/news/Page13075.aspx> or call Health Link at **811** or the Mental Health Help Line at **1-877-303-2642**



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