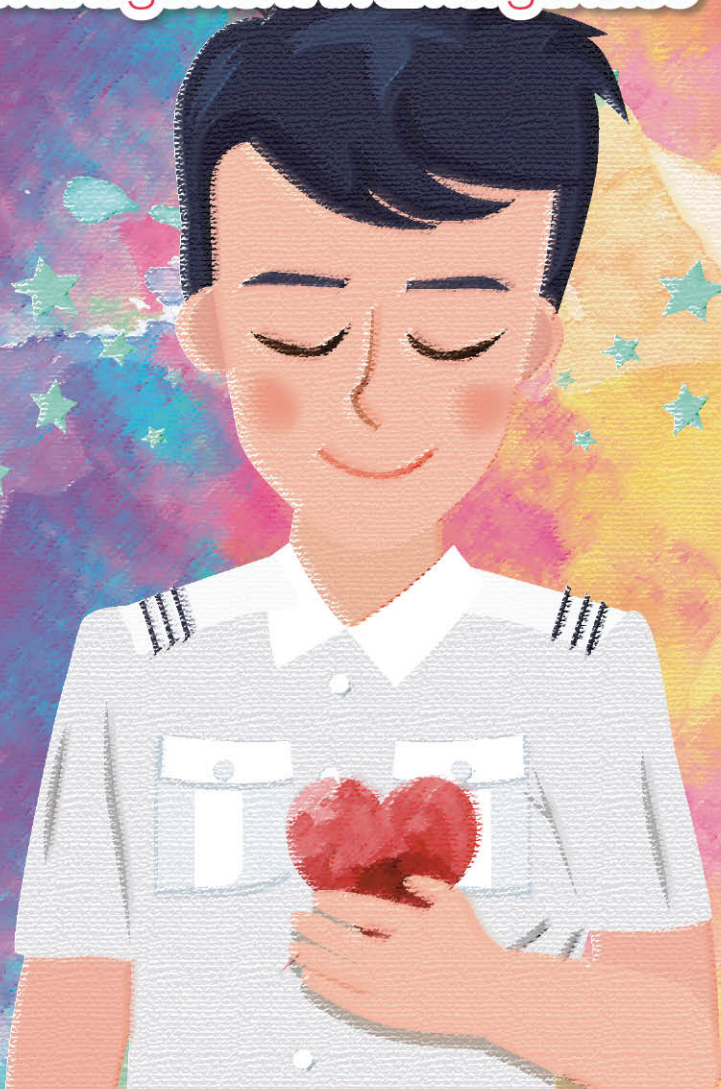




Beyond Helping Others

Beyond Helping Others

Stress Reactions and
Management in Emergencies





Emergency workers are usually professionally trained and are capable of handling different kinds of emergencies. However, most of them may fail to recognize the stress or feeling of distress that are brought along by their work. Constantly witnessing people in pain, helpless situation, and different kinds of tragedies, emergency workers, too, can have different stress reactions.



Sources of Stress for Emergency Workers

Emergency workers may experience a lot of stress under certain demanding situations, which could cause strong emotional responses and in turn affect their work performance. Examples include:

- Dealing with large-scale disasters
- Coming into contact with severely injured or deceased children
- Extensive media coverage on the incident
- Facing violent individuals who may pose threats to the safety of emergency workers
- Realizing that the rescued victim in critical condition is one's relative or acquaintance
- Causing casualties of civilians during emergency operations
- Serious injury or fatality of associates during operations
- Exposure to risks of significant health impairment to self or others caused by hazardous chemicals or diseases
- Encountering individuals, families or communities with intense emotional responses and psychological distress
- Confronting unpleasant situations, such as handling of dead bodies and human remains





Common Reactions to Disaster

Common Stress Reactions

- The following are some common stress reactions during or after disaster work. These reactions are normal and should not cause alarm at first; they are usually transitional and will gradually subside after some time. For some individuals, these reactions may have a delayed expression, surfacing weeks or even months after the disaster work.

Warning Signals

- If the following symptoms surface during or after the emergency operation, emergency workers should take a break or seek assistance immediately. These signals indicate that we are physically and mentally exhausted. Immediate actions should be taken to alleviate our condition from further deteriorating.





Common Stress Reactions

Warning Signals

1. Physical

- Heart palpitation, dizziness, headache, muscle pain/ tension, sweating/ chills, nausea, diarrhea, fatigue, thirst, blurred vision, sleep disturbance
- Difficulty in breathing, high blood pressure, severe chest pain, symptoms of shock

2. Cognitive

- Slowed thinking, poor concentration, forgetfulness, distortion in time perception, decreased problem solving ability, loss of objectivity, frustration, nightmares
- Serious disruption in thinking, disorganized thinking, inability to express oneself, decreased alertness, excessive worry, inability to make decisions



Common Stress Reactions

Warning Signals

3. Emotional

- Anxiety, anger, irritability, guilt, shock, sadness, self-blame/ blaming others, denial, fear, unable to control emotions, feeling depressed, feeling of failure, numbness
- Panic reactions, extreme fear or shock, loss of self-control, inappropriate emotion

4. Behavioral

- Hyperactivity, difficulty in expressing oneself verbally or in writing, decreased efficiency, emotional labile, increased use of alcohol, tobacco or drugs, social withdrawal, change in eating appetite, agitation
- Extreme hyperactivity, obvious changes in speech pattern, frequent anger outbursts, antisocial acts (e.g. violence), crying spells, unnecessary risk-taking behaviors




Even in distressing and difficult situations, emergency workers, given their strong sense of commitment to their work, may sometimes ignore their own needs and refuse to rest and recharge. Not only will this compromise the efficiency of rescue operations, it can also lead to burnout and compassion fatigue, adversely affecting their mental health in the long term.



Strategies for Stress Management

For Organizations and Supervisors

Pre-operation

-  Establish a coordinated organization plan for disaster response, delineating clearly the role of each department, working unit and individual so as to reduce the anticipatory anxiety in workers.
-  Provide appropriate trainings for every emergency worker. Skillful techniques and drills can enhance their abilities in handling stressful and critical conditions.
-  Provide emergency workers with adequate information about the incident. A quick briefing and forewarning before actual operation can provide workers with psychological preparation on what they may encounter at the scene. This could reduce shock. Clearly lay out the chain of command so that the mechanisms and channels of communication could be easily followed by workers. This could ensure efficient relaying and exchanging of important information, lessening the decisional burden of the front-line workers.



- ✦ Incorporate concepts of psychological resilience, self-care and psychological trauma into training to enhance emergency workers' ability to cope with adversity.
- ✦ Provide active psychological support to emergency workers, for example, establish a buddy system; organize peer-support schemes for workers in need/ interested workers, or educate them with the knowledge of psychological first-aid. This could promote mutual emotional support among staff.
- ✦ Take measures to lower the resistance of workers in seeking help.





During Operation



Arrange appropriately the working time for each worker appropriately. Each shift should not be exceeding 12 hours and short breaks should be given from time to time. It can prevent workers from burning out, which can compromise work efficiency.



Rotate workers among low-stress, moderate-stress, and high-stress tasks. Avoid persistent designation of staff to high-stress tasks.



Ensure each unit has adequate manpower, including administrators, supervisors and supporting staff.



Monitor workers' performance. Identify any unusual stress reactions, especially for those who underwent tremendous changes in life in the past or in recent times, and for those who are recently under stress.



New workers may not be suitable to handle emergencies alone; they should be paired-up with other more well-trained and experienced colleagues.



Whenever possible, staff should work as groups of two or more. This serves as a check-and-balance system for members in the team, allowing better need assessment, decision making and priority setting etc. in emergency situations. Team members can also know more about the stress level of each other and provide suitable support or assistance when needed.



Commanders also need periodic breaks. This can reduce the chance of making mistakes.



Once the emergency workers are ready to leave the disaster scene, arrange a quiet place for them to take a rest. Provide them with food and drinks and give them a chance to express their feelings.





Post-operation



Encourage managerial and front-line staff to attend debriefings in order to acknowledge their efforts and gather opinions for future improvements.



Express gratitude to all colleagues, including supporting staff, by officially issuing appreciation letters or certificates in order to recognize their efforts and contributions.



Unsatisfactory results or mistakes may happen during operations. While we try hard to face or rectify the mistakes, it is also important to put ourselves in the staff's shoes. Empathetic understanding foster responsibility taking and facilitate the reviewing of areas for improvements.



Provide psycho-education in stress management.



Observe and see if the staff could gradually resume normal work. Take note of any signs signaling abnormality or stress and encourage the colleague to seek professional help as soon as possible.



Strategies for Stress Management

For Workers

Pre-operation



Equip yourself with the ability to differentiate between normal and abnormal stress reactions. Also, learn strategies to manage stress.



Maintain regular practice in stress management strategies, including the incorporation of short relaxation exercise into workday schedule, increasing participation in positive activities (e.g. keeping a gratitude journal and appreciating the beautiful things in life), spending time with family and friends, having adequate sleep, and restricting the intake of caffeine, nicotine or other substances.





During Operation



Keep close contact with other colleagues and be each other's keeper. Watch and see if anyone is over-stressed.



Open up yourself at work and cooperate with other colleagues. Minimize the pressure that could have caused by interpersonal conflicts.



Arrange frequent and short breaks away from the scene if possible. Relax and put aside all worries and pressure from work during the break to replenish your physical and mental energy.



Abandon the common thoughts that will hinder self-care, for example:



"It's selfish if I take time to rest."



"I must keep working and make the most contributions."



"I am the only one who can accomplish these tasks."



In face of prolonged operations, try to maintain regular patterns of sleep and diet. Stay hydrated and have sufficient carbohydrates intake.



Monitor your stress reactions. If there is anything unusual, contact your supervisor immediately and seek help. Over-stretching yourself will only bring harm to your own health and jeopardize the quality of disaster work.



Jot down key information on notepads if necessary. This can help free up mental energy and organize your work.





Post-operation



Show support to colleagues. Encourage each other and appreciate the contributions made by each other. Also, try to listen to the feelings of others and avoid making unconstructive criticisms.



Avoid magnifying or being picky about the unsatisfactory performance of yourself/ your colleagues during the operation. Try to show understanding to the limitations at that moment and place the focus on improving the future operations.



Do not take others' anger too personally. Anger is a common reaction for people facing emergencies and psychological traumas. Some of the injured or colleagues may unintentionally take their emotions out on others.



Try to appreciate and encourage yourself. Don't be too harsh to yourself.



Identify and accept the fact that certain things cannot be changed by us. Allow yourself to feel bad in a distressing situation.



Don't isolate yourself. Stay in touch with others and keep up with your normal daily routine.



Express your reactions, thoughts and feelings by sharing with others or writing diaries. These help restore your inner peace and relieve pain. Stress can be alleviated if we could carefully choose a trustworthy listener.



Maintain a healthy diet. Even if you have a reduced appetite, try to keep up your nutrient intake by breaking your regular meals into smaller and more frequent ones.



Avoid food with high sugar or caffeine content. Alcohol is particularly harmful to your health.



Moderate amount of exercise can reduce the physiological reactions induced by stress. Jogging, swimming, and brisk walking etc. can relax your muscle and banish tension from your body.



Get sufficient sleep. Before going to bed or in case of insomnia, perform activities that can help you relax, e.g. taking a hot bath, reading a good book, listening to your favorite music, or strolling at a comfortable place.



Tell your family and friends that you have participated in disaster work. Share with them your current feelings and needs (e.g. wishing to spend time alone, go for a sleep, or head out for a walk). Honest and sincere conversations can reduce misunderstanding and alleviate stress.



Seek temporary assistance from others, including professionals, if you are getting easily irritated in child care or parenting.



Participate in memorial activities and ceremonies related to the incident to facilitate the expression of your feelings.



Avoid making important decisions when you are under significant stress.



Cultivate a spiritual life, be it religious or non-religious. Through ways like praying and meditation, we can purify our souls and stay calm even in adversities. Form positive and optimistic beliefs so that we can endure different challenges.



Accept the appearance of repetitive images, thoughts or dreams. They will fade away as time goes by.



Emergency workers often push themselves to be tough, making them uncomfortable to accept help from others. However, we should recognize the need and importance of seeking professional assistance. Through professional counselling, we can have a more in-depth understanding of ourselves and the reasons behind our symptoms. Not only can this prevent the problems from worsening, it can also strengthen our ability to cope with stress.



Practice relaxation techniques consistently, which can help reduce stress reactions. The following breathing exercise is one of the techniques.









Breathing Exercise



We need to reserve some time for relaxation every day, and one of the effective ways to achieve a sense of relaxation is by practicing breathing.

1. Sit on a comfortable chair or lie down in bed; bend your knees slightly.
2. Put your hands either on your stomach or by the sides of your body.
3. Try to relax your whole body. Imagine that you have a balloon in your stomach.
4. Inhale to inflate the balloon and exhale to deflate it.
5. Inhale deeply and slowly through your nose.
6. Try to make your stomach bulge during inhalation.
7. Exhale slowly through your mouth.
8. Tighten your stomach muscle during exhalation and squeeze all the exhaust gases out.
9. After every deep breath, maintain your regular breathing for about 10 seconds.
10. Then repeat all the steps for deep breathing again.



-  You may sit down or lie down calmly after 6-7 times of deep breathing.
-  Maintain your natural breathing rhythms and bring your attention to observing the changes of your stomach as you breathe: during inhalation, your stomach will be rising gently; during exhalation, your stomach will be sinking gently.
-  Deliberate breathing is not needed. Just observe the changes of your stomach.
-  Spending about 10 minutes each time, practice this breathing exercise at least once a day. With regular practice, this is an effective way to achieve a relaxed state.





When Do We Need To Seek Professional Assistance?

If the following symptoms last over a month and disrupt your daily functioning (including work, social life, and family relationships etc.), you should seek professional service (e.g. clinical psychologists, doctors and counselors) as soon as possible.

- Harboring distressing images and cognitions about the disaster in mind
- Frequent nightmares or dreams about the disaster
- Having intrusive flashbacks as if the disaster is happening again
- Intense psychological distress or physiological reactions at the exposure to people or things related to the disaster
- Avoidance of people, things or places that are related to the disaster
- Numbness or loss of interest in daily activities
- Social isolations, reduced contact with others or reduced participation in activities
- Inability to remember important aspects of the disaster
- Prolonged insomnia or hypersomnia
- Irritability and frequent anger outbursts
- Poor concentration
- Hypervigilance and heightened sensitivity

Suicidal or homicidal ideations warrant immediate professional treatment. Any delay in action will pose threats to the safety of your own self and others.





Professional Counseling Service

The following are some organizations which provide counseling services or clinical psychology services:

Social Welfare Department

Integrated Family Service Centres

Clinical Psychology Units

Non-Governmental Organizations

Hong Kong Caritas Family Service

Christian Family Service Centre

Hong Kong Family Welfare Society

The Mental Health Association
of Hong Kong

Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service

Hospital Authority

General Hospitals

Psychiatric Specialist
Out-patient Clinics

The list of other non-governmental organizations can be found on the Social Welfare Department website or the Division of Clinical Psychology of the Hong Kong Psychological Society website.

Closing Remark

Disaster work can be challenging and painful, yet it is rewarding at the same time. Helping people in crisis is a meaningful job. By working hard to enhance our stress coping ability, treat yourself, your colleagues, and subordinates well, manage the stress reactions appropriately and accept assistance from others when needed, we will surely be competent to overcome the challenges that lie ahead in our work. We can also maximize our potentials in bringing more benefits to others.



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For more disaster-related psycho-educational resources,
please visit <https://hadps.ha.org.hk/>.



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