



Heart-Healthy Tips: Managing and Preventing Stress for Emergency Responders

Citizens are taking simple steps to prepare for emergencies in their homes, businesses, and schools. It is also important for first responders to be mentally prepared for mass emergency situations. Recovery efforts are undeniably stressful and taking measures before disaster strikes can help ensure that responders will be mentally ready for the challenge. These tips from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center will help you prepare both your department and yourself for a large-scale traumatic experience.

Organizational Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management

1. Provide effective management structure and leadership. Elements include:
 - ▶ Clear chain of command and reporting relationships.
 - ▶ Available and accessible supervisors.
 - ▶ Disaster orientation for all workers.
 - ▶ Shifts of no longer than 12 hours, followed by 12 hours off.
 - ▶ Briefings at the beginning of shifts as workers enter the operation. Shifts should overlap so that outgoing workers brief incoming workers.
 - ▶ Necessary supplies (e.g., paper, forms, pens, educational materials).
 - ▶ Communication tools (e.g., cell phones, radios).
2. Define a clear purpose and goals.
3. Define clear intervention goals and strategies appropriate to assignment setting.
4. Define roles by function.
5. Orient and train staff with written role descriptions for each assignment setting. When setting is under the jurisdiction of another agency (e.g., Red Cross, FEMA), inform workers of each agency's role, contact people, and expectations.
6. Nurture team support.
7. Create a buddy system to support and monitor stress reactions. Promote a positive atmosphere of support and tolerance with frequent praise.
8. Develop a plan for stress management. For example:
 - ▶ Assess workers' functioning regularly.
 - ▶ Rotate workers between low-, mid-, and high-stress tasks.
 - ▶ Encourage breaks and time away from assignment.
 - ▶ Educate about signs and symptoms of worker stress and coping strategies.
 - ▶ Provide individual and group defusing and debriefing.
 - ▶ Develop an exit plan for workers leaving the operation, including a debriefing, reentry information, opportunity to critique, and formal recognition for service.

Find more health and wellness tips and resources for first responders at www.healthy-firefighter.org.

Individual Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management

1. Manage workload.
 - ▶ Set priority levels for tasks with a realistic work plan.
 - ▶ Delegate existing workloads so workers are not attempting disaster response in addition to their usual jobs.
2. Balance lifestyle.
 - ▶ Get physical exercise and stretch muscles when possible.
 - ▶ Eat nutritiously and avoid excessive junk food, caffeine, alcohol, or tobacco.
 - ▶ Get adequate sleep and rest, especially on longer assignments.
 - ▶ Maintain contact and connection with primary social supports.
3. Apply stress reduction techniques.
 - ▶ Reduce physical tension by such activities as taking deep breaths, meditating, and walking mindfully.
 - ▶ Use time off for exercise, reading, listening to music, taking a bath, talking to family, or getting a special meal.
 - ▶ Talk about emotions and reactions with coworkers during appropriate times.
4. Practice self-awareness.
 - ▶ Learn to recognize and heed early warning signs for stress reactions.
 - ▶ Accept that you may need help to assess problematic stress reactions.
 - ▶ Avoid overly identifying with survivors'/victims' grief and trauma, which may interfere with discussing painful material.
 - ▶ Understand differences between professional helping relationships and friendships.
 - ▶ Examine personal prejudices and cultural stereotypes.
 - ▶ Be mindful that vicarious traumatization or compassion fatigue may develop.
 - ▶ Recognize when a personal disaster experience or loss interferes with effectiveness.

For more information, including common disaster reactions to look for, signs that you may need stress management assistance, and tips for managing your stress, read [*Tips for Managing and Preventing Stress: A Guide for Emergency and Disaster Response Workers*](#). Learn more about mental health issues from [SAMHSA](#).