



## Tips for Supervisors of Disaster Responders:

### HELPING STAFF MANAGE STRESS WHEN RETURNING TO WORK

Many people who are involved in disaster response work find that it has a unique blend of stressors and rewards, both of which are powerful parts of the response experience. Upon completing a disaster response assignment, many responders find their return to regular duties to be a complicated, prolonged, and difficult process. In addition, coworkers who maintained the ongoing operation of the office during the response period may have experienced unwelcome demands, causing them to experience stress, as well. Supervisors can help manage the stress of returning disaster response team members and encourage them to gain perspective on their experience, contributing to their employees' personal and professional growth. This tip sheet can help supervisors ease the transition for disaster responders returning to work, recognize and reduce potential difficulties in the workplace, and enhance positive consequences for all of their staff.

### STRENGTHENING STRESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS BEFORE AND DURING A DISASTER RESPONSE

The ideal time to strengthen stress management skills, both for you and your employees, is before a disaster occurs. These skills are also important for employees who stay behind when

their coworkers are engaged in offsite disaster response work. You can offer the following self-care tips to your employees, and practice them yourself, to prevent and manage stress in your workplace both before and during disaster response and recovery efforts:

- Maintain a healthy diet, and get routine exercise and adequate rest.
- Spend time with family and friends.
- Pay attention to health concerns, and schedule routine checkups to ensure you are ready when called for an assignment.
- Keep up with personal tasks (e.g., pay bills, mow the lawn, shop for groceries). This can help you avoid having to complete last-minute tasks that can take away from time spent preparing for your response assignment.
- Think about your goals for upcoming assignments, and how you can apply lessons learned from past assignments to future situations.
- Reflect upon what your disaster response experiences have meant personally and professionally.
- Get involved in personal and family disaster preparedness activities.



## PREPARING YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR RETURNING EMPLOYEES

Supporting your returning employees starts with organizational policies and priorities. You can work with other leaders of your organization to:

- Create an atmosphere where people can be open with supervisors about their experiences, feelings, and concerns.
- Create structured forums for responders to present their lessons learned or recommendations for organization-wide preparedness activities.
- Optimize liberal or flexible leave policies for returning employees.
- Be candid about the complex and potentially difficult job that supervisors and managers face—meeting both individual needs and the need to maintain ongoing work.

## HELPING YOUR RETURNING EMPLOYEES TRANSITION TO ROUTINE WORK

Upon returning to their duties, some employees may face difficulties readjusting. Many of these challenges typically subside over time as staff return to previous routines. If these difficulties do not subside, refer to the **When To Suggest That Your Staff Seek Help** section of this tip sheet. A few potential difficulties are described below, along with some tips on how you can help.

**Unrelenting fatigue.** Sometimes excessive stress results in never feeling rested. Some employees may experience extreme fatigue, even when they are getting a sufficient amount of sleep each night. Encourage your employees to get a medical evaluation if the problem persists.

**Pace change.** Disaster responders grow accustomed to the rapid pace of the disaster

environment, and for some employees, returning to a more typical rhythm of work may be challenging. It may appear as though people are moving at a much slower pace than they remember. Encourage returning responders to refrain from judging colleagues or criticizing the difference in the pace of work in your organization compared to their disaster work.

**Cynicism.** During disaster work, responders often see the worst in individuals and systems, and it is easy to become cynical. These feelings are expected, and they typically diminish over time. Try to help your team members regain perspective by reviewing the successes and positive results from their assignment.

**Dissatisfaction with routine work.** Saving lives and protecting our fellow citizens' health and safety can be rewarding and energizing, but most work does not provide such dramatic and immediate reinforcement. As a result, some returning team members may perceive their daily work routine as lacking in meaning and satisfaction. Ask about the positive things your employees learned and experienced during the disaster response, and find ways to incorporate these things into their work. For example, you may consider giving them a role in your company's emergency response planning.

**Easily evoked emotions.** Sometimes the combination of intense experiences, fatigue, and stress leaves disaster responders especially vulnerable to unexpected emotions. For example, they may cry easily, be quick to anger, or experience dramatic mood swings. These are fairly common reactions that typically subside over time. You can help responders cope with their emotions in the following ways:

- Provide support and education to all your staff members, and allow them to discuss their experiences with you in order to determine the best way to decrease these reactions in the workplace.
- Encourage returning employees to be aware of and monitor their reactions.

- If strong emotions become disruptive in the workplace, consider the following strategies:
  - Discuss the options of additional leave.
  - Help disaster responders locate a stress management or responder stress training course.
  - Encourage them to seek professional help. Some disaster responders are concerned about being stigmatized when seeking mental health or substance misuse support services, so it is important for you to create a “safe place” without judgment for employees to discuss accessing support services if needed. Check out the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet for more information on finding support services.

**Sharing experiences.** Though returning employees may want to share their experiences with others, some may feel uncomfortable doing so. You can help ease team members’ worries by taking the following actions:

- Consider facilitating group meetings that provide a structured opportunity for your employees to share experiences, especially coping skills, with others who have had similar experiences. Encourage returning employees to reflect on their experience in terms of the following:
  - How did they function in the stressful disaster environment?
  - What unrecognized skills or talents did they discover?
- Caution staff to take care when discussing disturbing scenes. Others may be upset by graphic descriptions of the disaster environment.

**Difficulties with colleagues and supervisors.**

Returning employees may not experience a “welcome back” from their colleagues that meets their expectations. Some coworkers may resent the additional workload they had to carry as a result of employees’ absence, or they may resent the recognition that the disaster responders

receive upon their return. Consider taking steps to avert these difficulties:

- Be sure to show proper appreciation for the impact that everyone feels when one or more employees are on assignment and others are not.
- Remind staff that everyone is a part of the response effort, not only those directly deployed but also those who remain in their regular posts providing coverage for those in the field.
- Be aware that, if the returning staff were exposed to potentially contagious illnesses while on the disaster assignment (or coworkers *believe* this to be the case), returning staff may be isolated or stigmatized. Accurate information, delivered to the entire team by an unbiased source (such as a local medical expert), can help ease this type of situation.

**CHECK YOURSELF: HOW ARE YOU FEELING NOW THAT YOUR EMPLOYEES HAVE RETURNED?**

You also need to be aware of your own reactions and adjustments as a result of your team’s disaster assignment and return. Seeking support from other supervisors you work with (or friends in similar positions) can help you prepare for and adjust to the return of your team members. Planning for every possibility is important—consider taking the following actions:

- Be prepared with resources and referrals for staff members who may require help addressing severe or prolonged stress symptoms that are affecting their work.
- Know what types of interventions you can employ if you witness team members degrading others who are seeking help.
- Be sure to apply self-care recommendations to yourself, especially if you are starting to identify with returning staff members’ descriptions of stress symptoms, such as sleep problems, stomach ailments, or irritability.

## 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>

Department of Veterans Affairs\*

National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD Information Voicemail: 1-802-296-6300

Website: <http://www.ptsd.va.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>

### 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>

Workplace Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-WORKPLACE (1-800-967-5752)

Website: <http://www.workplace.samhsa.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.*

## WHEN TO SUGGEST THAT YOUR STAFF SEEK HELP

Stress is an anticipated reaction to situations like disasters and other traumatic events, and many signs of stress typically diminish over time. Returning employees may need more support, however, if they exhibit one or more of the following symptoms:

- Disorientation (e.g., appearing dazed, experiencing memory loss, being unable to give the date or time or recall recent events)
- Depression (e.g., feeling continuing sadness, withdrawing from others)
- Anxiety (e.g., feeling constantly on edge or restless)
- Acute psychiatric symptoms (e.g., hearing voices, experiencing delusional thinking)
- Inability to care for self (e.g., not eating, bathing, or handling day-to-day life tasks)
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts or plans; feelings of hopelessness or despair
- Problematic use of alcohol, illicit drugs, or prescription medication
- Evidence of domestic violence, child abuse, or elder abuse

If you think any of your employees are experiencing persistent or severe stress, suggest that they talk with a primary care physician (especially if they have been exposed to an infectious disease or potentially toxic materials), seek assistance from your organization's Employee Assistance Program, or seek help from 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). Find additional supports and services in the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet.



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