

Coping with Tragedy: Coping Strategies for Staff and Volunteers

As a staff, emergency or volunteer responder to a natural disaster or violent event, you may be deeply involved in the rescue efforts surrounding the disaster. The tragedies you are witnessing, the long hours you are working, and the stress of dealing with others' needs along with your own frustrations and personal losses will be physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. In the days and weeks ahead, you can expect to experience many strong emotions including anger, despair, guilt, powerlessness and cynicism. These feelings are normal and are not signs of weakness. You are human and need to take care of yourself before you can summon energy to take care of others.

Here are some strategies to help you manage during this stressful time:

- **Take stock of how you are feeling.** Realize that the feelings of distress or anger in yourself and other workers are legitimate and not the signs of professional weakness or lack of professionalism.
- **Make sure you take a break from the action.** If possible, get away from the area where you are working, either outside the relief site or in a room at the back of the shelter.
- **Take care of your body.** As best as you can, pay attention to eating properly and getting some rest. Taking time away from your assignment to eat, drink, clean up or rest may seem like a waste of your time, but it will help you work at peak efficiency and do a better job with fewer errors.
- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs or engaging in other risky behaviors to deal with the stress and pressure.** If you feel these are the only ways you can manage the pain, anxiety, rage, fear or other emotions you are experiencing, ask for help.
- **Talk to other co-workers or volunteers about your experiences and reactions.** You need to share your stories, too. Make sure that you get support from others, not only to deal with the symptoms of stress, but to identify and deal with the sources of the stress.

When you return home after a taxing assignment, make sure to take part in any debriefing procedures that your organization offers. Take a break from work and talk with other professionals (such as counselors) to help you process the events you have been a part of. After a tragedy, you will need time to get back into a "normal" life again.

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.