



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress Uniformed Services University School of Medicine

STRESS MANAGEMENT for HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

The magnitude of death and destruction in disasters and the extent of the response demand special attention to the needs of health care providers. Physical safety and security of providers (as well as patients) must take first priority.

The psychological challenges that health care providers face after disasters are related to exposure to patients and their families who are traumatized by suffering nearly unbearable losses. These psychological challenges combine with long hours of work, decreased sleep and fatigue. Seeing the effects of disaster on others and hearing their stories increase the stress of providers. Self care, self-monitoring and peer monitoring are as important as caring for patients. The following management plan for your staff may help minimize later difficulties.

- Communicate clearly and in an optimistic manner. Identify mistakes for yourself and others and correct them. Compliments can serve as powerful motivators and stress moderators.
- Encourage health care providers to monitor themselves and each other with regard to their basic needs such as food, drink and sleep. Becoming biologically deprived puts them at risk and may also compromise their ability to care for their patients.
- Ensure regular breaks from tending to patients. When on break allow and encourage providers to do something unrelated to the traumatic event and which they find comforting, fun or relaxing. This might be taking a walk, listening to music, reading a book, or talking with a friend.
- Some people may feel guilt if they have fun or enjoy themselves when so many others are suffering. It is important to recognize that normal life events are an important respite from the horrors of a disaster. Help people to recognize this.
- Establish a place for providers to talk to their colleagues and receive support from one another. A goal of terrorist acts is to isolate people in fear and anxiety. Telling one's own story and listening to other's can alleviate this isolation.
- Encourage contact with loved ones as well as activities for relaxation and enjoyment.
- Remember that not all people are the same. Some need to talk while others need to be alone. Recognize and respect these differences.
- Hold department or hospital wide meetings to keep people informed of plans and events.
- Use hospital newsletters or newspapers as ways to recognize successes and to transmit information.
- Consider establishing awards or other recognition for dedicated service during a disaster.
- Establish support programs for family of staffs that provide information about the status of loved ones who are not able to return home on a regular basis. These programs should provide help and social support to the family.