

Tips for Oil Spill Disaster Response Workers

Managing and Preventing Stress for Managers and Workers



Engaging in Gulf Coast disaster response and recovery efforts is inevitably stressful. While oil spill clean-up work and the rehabilitation of injured animals is personally rewarding and challenging, it also may affect responders in harmful ways. The long hours, breadth of needs and demands, ambiguous roles, and exposure to both environmental damage and community impact can adversely affect even the most experienced professional. Too often, the stress experienced by responders is addressed as an afterthought. With a little effort, however, steps can be taken to minimize the effects of stress.

Oil spill disaster response work in the Gulf Coast is both physically and emotionally challenging and can lead to significant stress. Stress prevention and management should be addressed in two critical contexts: the organization and the individual. Stress prevention and management approaches allow both workers and organizations to anticipate stressors and shape responses, rather than simply reacting to a crisis when it occurs. Suggestions for organizational and individual stress prevention and management approaches are presented below.

Organizational Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management

1. Provide effective management structure and leadership. Elements include the following:
 - 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 oil spill

disaster response workers brief incoming workers.

- Necessary supplies (e.g., protective gear, drinking water, paper, forms, pens, educational materials)
 - Communication tools (e.g., mobile phones, radios)
2. Define a clear purpose and goals (ensure worker safety)
 3. Define clear intervention goals and strategies appropriate to the oil spill response assignment (reiterate worker safety)
 4. Define roles by function
 5. Orient and train staff with written role descriptions for the setting of each oil spill response assignment. When a setting is under the jurisdiction of another organization or agency (e.g., oil spill contractors, Coast Guard, Red Cross, behavioral health agency), 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, do the following:

- Assess workers' functioning regularly
- Rotate workers among low-, mid-, and high-stress tasks
- Encourage breaks and time away from the oil spill response
- Educate about signs and symptoms of response worker stress, including use of drugs and alcohol as coping strategies
- Provide individual and group debriefings
- Develop an exit plan for response workers leaving the operation, including a debriefing, reentry information, opportunity to critique, and formal recognition for service

Individual Approaches for Stress Prevention and Management

1. Manage workload

- Set priority levels for oil spill response tasks with a realistic work plan
- Do not be discouraged if oil spill clean-up and response goals cannot be accomplished immediately

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 activities such as taking deep breaths, meditating, and walking mindfully
- Use time off for exercise, reading, listening to music, or talking to family
- 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
- 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 response to this disaster or loss interferes with effectiveness

Normal Reactions to a Traumatic Event

- Everyone who responds to the disaster in the Gulf Coast is both physically and emotionally impacted by it
- Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event
- You will likely try to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment
- You may deny the need for rest and recovery time



Hotlines

Oil Spill Distress Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990

National Domestic Violence Hotline
Toll-Free: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
TTY: 1-800-787-3224

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)
Web Site: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Treatment Locator

SAMHSA Treatment Referral Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)
Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/>

Information Clearinghouse

SAMHSA Health Information Network
Toll-Free: 1-877-726-4727
TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)
Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/shin>

Helpful Resources

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515
E-Mail: DTAC@samhsa.hhs.gov
Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/>
For specific State referral information, please contact SAMHSA DTAC.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
Phone: 404-639-3311
Toll-Free: 1-800-311-3435
Web Site: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2002-107/>

Federal Emergency Management Agency
Web Site: <http://www.fema.gov/index.shtml>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Web Site: <http://www.nctsn.org>

Workplace Helpline
Toll-Free: 1-800-967-5752
Web Site: <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.

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Signs That You May Need Stress Management Assistance

- Disorientation or confusion and difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty remembering instructions
- Difficulty maintaining balance
- Becoming easily frustrated and being uncharacteristically argumentative
- Inability to engage in problem solving and difficulty making decisions
- Unnecessary risk taking
- Tremors, headaches, and nausea
- Tunnel vision and muffled hearing
- Colds or flu-like symptoms
- Limited attention span and difficulty concentrating
- Loss of objectivity
- Inability to relax when off duty
- Refusal to follow orders or to leave the scene
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Unusual clumsiness

Ways to Help Manage Your Stress

- Limit on-duty work hours to no more than 12 hours per day
- Rotate work from high-stress to lower stress functions
- Rotate work from the scene to routine assignments, as practical
- Use counseling assistance programs available through your agency or organization
- Drink plenty of water, and eat healthy snacks such as fresh fruit, whole grain breads, and other energy foods
- Take frequent, brief breaks from the scene, as practical
- Talk about your emotions to process the environmental damage you have seen and what you have done
- Stay in touch with your family and friends
- Participate in memorials, rituals, and use of symbols as a way to express feelings
- Pair up with another responder so that you may monitor one another's stress