

Stress Management during an Emergency

As an employer, you are responsible for the health and safety of your employees even under emergency conditions.

As you and your employees respond to an emergency or disaster, you will see and experience events and situations that may strain your ability to function.

In the wake of Katrina, these events may include witnessing or experiencing tragedy, death, serious injuries, and threatening situations. Your workers may also have divided loyalties to their families and to you. Your employees' physical and psychological well-being, as well as their ability to function during a prolonged response and recovery, depends their ability to manage this stress.

Individuals under stress react in different ways. The signs and symptoms of this stress can be physical, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral. Although not all-inclusive, the list below may help supervisors identify workers under stress.

Physical Signs

- Fatigue
- Chills
- Unusual thirst
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- Dizziness

Behavioral Signs

- Sleeplessness, inability to rest or relax
- Withdrawing into oneself
- Antisocial behavior
- New or increased use of alcohol
- Change in methods of communications
- Loss or increase in appetite
- Irritability

Mental

- Confusion and uncertainty
- Nightmares
- Inability to pay attention or make decisions
- Poor concentration, memory
- Poor problem solving ability

Emotional

- Expressions of grief, crying
- Fearfulness, especially in situations familiar to the employee
- Expressions of guilt

- Intense anger
- Apprehension and depression
- Irritability
- Chronic anxiety

Monitor employees by observing them and talking with them. You can take the following steps to help reduce significant stress:

- Require an immediate 15-minute rest break.
- Require periodic 15-minute rest breaks during the initial clean response.
- Limit exposure to noise and odors.
- Provide non-caffeinated fluids to drink.
- Provide low sugar and low fat food.
- Get the person to talk about his or her feelings.
- If necessary, allow the employee to leave and do not rush the person back to work.

If your observations indicate the need, hire a crisis intervention specialist or mental health professional to handle stress management. By intervening early you will contribute to your employee's recovery by providing support and by directing employees to further counseling and treatment services if they become necessary

Workers responding to emergencies or disasters will see and experience events that will strain their ability to function. These events may include having to witness or experience tragedy, death, serious injuries, and threatening situations. Their physical and psychological well-being, as well as their future ability to function through a prolonged response, will depend upon how they manage this stress.

The signs and symptoms of this stress can be physical, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral. Individuals react in different ways. The list below is not exhaustive, but may help supervisors identify workers under stress.

Physical

- Fatigue
- Chills
- Unusual thirst
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- Dizziness

Cognitive

- Uncertainty

- Confusion
- Nightmares
- Poor attention/decision making ability
- Poor concentration, memory
- Poor problem solving ability

Emotional

- Grief
- Fear
- Guilt
- Intense anger
- Apprehension and depression
- Irritability
- Chronic anxiety

Behavioral

- Inability to rest
- Withdrawal
- Antisocial behavior
- Increased alcohol consumption
- Change in communications
- Loss/increase in appetite

During emergency response, monitoring employees by simple conversation and observation may help identify early signs for some responders. The following steps can help reduce significant stress:

- Limit exposure to noise and odors.
- Require an immediate 15-minute rest break.
- Provide non-caffeinated fluids to drink.
- Provide low sugar and low fat food.
- Get the person to talk about his or her feelings.
- Do not rush the person back to work.

Stress management is handled most effectively by specially trained individuals, such as crisis intervention specialists. Early intervention supports recovery by providing support and linking employees to further counseling and treatment services if they become necessary.