

Lesson Overview

During a disaster, both survivors and helpers may experience disaster-related stress. By understanding the possible effects of these stressful events and the steps to take to cope with or lessen their effects, CERT members can take better care of themselves and the people that they are helping.

Before working in a disaster, it is helpful for CERT members to know about:

- Vicarious trauma.
 - Steps to reduce personal stress.
 - Ways for CERT team members and leaders to reduce stress.
 - Survivor reactions.
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Personal Stress Reduction

Working in a disaster can expose you to people's pain, suffering, loss, and grief. There is also the possibility that you may have suffered losses. Vicarious trauma is a potential occupational hazard for CERT workers, and the stress can affect their overall effectiveness.

There are three important measures that you can take to protect yourself from the effects of vicarious trauma:

- Don't overidentify with survivors.
 - Be alert to signs of disaster trauma in yourself.
 - Take steps to reduce stress.
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Don't Overidentify

First, as you interact with survivors, it is very important to maintain psychological distance.

As you work with and listen to survivors, you will probably have your own feelings and thoughts about their situation. As you listen to and respond to survivors, try not to overidentify with them and take on their feelings as your own. Doing so can increase your own stress and reduce your overall effectiveness.

Recognize Signs of Trauma

Second, monitor yourself for signs of disaster-related trauma. By being alert to your reactions and state of mind, you can help to alleviate your stress.

Personal Stress Reduction (Continued)

Signs of Disaster Trauma

The following types of psychological and physiological responses may be observed in rescuers after a disaster.

Psychological Symptoms

- Irritability or anger
- Self-blame or the blaming of others
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Fear of recurrence
- Feeling stunned, numb, or overwhelmed
- Feeling helpless
- Mood swings
- Sadness, depression, and grief
- Denial
- Concentration and memory problems
- Relationship conflicts and marital discord

Physiological Symptoms

- Loss of appetite
 - Headaches or chest pain
 - Diarrhea, stomach pain, or nausea
 - Hyperactivity
 - Increase in alcohol or drug consumption
 - Nightmares
 - Inability to sleep
 - Fatigue or low energy
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Reduce Stress

The third way to manage the effects of disaster trauma is to take action to reduce stress.

Only you can determine what strategies will work for you. If you make the effort to identify your personal stress reducers before an incident occurs, you will be able to better apply them in a time of crisis.

Stress Reducers

You can also practice reducing stress by attending to your physical, emotional, psychological, and mental health needs in your everyday life.

The following approaches may help you reduce your stress levels in your everyday life.

Meet Your Physical Needs

- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Balance work, play, and rest.

Meet Your Emotional Needs

- Connect with others.
- Allow yourself to receive as well as give.

Meet Your Psychological and Spiritual Needs

- Use spiritual resources.
 - If necessary, be willing to talk to mental health professionals.
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Team Strategies for Stress Reduction

The CERT team organization provides psychological support for workers facing disaster trauma, and the CERT Team Leaders need to be proactive in taking steps with team members.

Strategies by which a Team Leader can help members reduce stress fall into four main areas:

- Training and communication
 - Teamwork
 - Pacing
 - Nutrition
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Training and Communication Strategies

The Team Leader can use strategies before, during, and after an incident to reduce CERT workers' stress.

- **Training:** Provide predisaster stress management training to all CERT personnel.
 - **Briefings:** At the start of an incident, brief CERT personnel about what they may see and what their emotional responses may be.
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Team Strategies for Stress Reduction (Continued)

Teamwork Strategies

The Team Leader should emphasize the team aspects of CERT.

- **Team focus:** Point out that working together and looking out for each other is an important aspect of combating stress.
 - **Team sharing:** Encourage team members to share the workload and the emotional load. Team sharing can help defuse pent-up emotions.
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Pacing Strategies

Pacing helps workers deal with the stress of disaster work.

- **Breaks:** Encourage rescuers to rest and regroup, to avoid becoming overtired. Mental and physical fatigue will reduce workers' effectiveness and may result in unsafe acts. Have workers take breaks away from the incident area.
 - **Rotation:** Rotate teams for breaks, giving them time to talk about their experiences. Rotate teams from high-stress to low-stress duties when possible.
 - **Gradual phase-out:** Phase workers out of the response effort gradually, moving them from high- to low-stress work before they leave.
 - **Nutrition:** CERT members should take breaks to drink water and eat healthy foods like fruits and granola bars. They should avoid excessive caffeine and refined sugar products. Maintaining a healthy, balanced diet helps maintain alertness.
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Working With Survivors' Trauma

A disaster has a psychological impact on survivors. As a CERT worker, you need to understand potential survivor reactions.

Understanding survivors' reactions will help you to reduce your own stressors and improve your ability to respond.

Emotional Phases of a Crisis

Some research studies have indicated that survivors go through emotional phases following a disaster.

- **Impact phase:** In the impact phase, survivors do not panic. They may, in fact, show no emotion.
- **Inventory phase:** The inventory phase immediately follows the event. In this phase, survivors assess damage and try to locate other survivors. Routine social ties tend to be discarded in favor of the more functional relationships required for initial response activities, such as search and rescue.
- **Rescue phase:** In the rescue phase, emergency services personnel—including CERTs—are responding. Survivors are willing to take direction from these groups without protest. CERT helmets and vests are an important means of identifying yourself as part of the response effort during this phase.
- **Recovery phase:** During the recovery phase, victims begin to realize that their lives may never be the same as before the disaster. They are likely to become angry and pull together **against** their rescuers.

Traumatic Stress

Traumatic stress may affect a survivor in three major areas:

- Cognitive Functioning
- Physical Health
- Interpersonal Relationships

Impact on Cognitive Functioning

Those who have suffered traumatic stress may:

- Act irrationally.
- Have difficulty making decisions.
- Act in ways that are out of character for them.
- Have difficulty retrieving or sharing memories.

Impact on Physical Health

Traumatic stress can cause a wide range of physical symptoms, such as:

- Chills, thirst, twitches, and muscle tremors.
- Fatigue, dizziness, weakness, and fainting.
- Nausea and headaches.
- Elevated blood pressure, rapid heart rate, and chest pain.

Traumatic Stress (Continued)

Impact on Interpersonal Relationships

Those who survive traumatic stress may undergo temporary or long-term personality changes that make interpersonal relationships difficult.

Mediating Factors

A number of factors may affect the strength and nature of an individual's reaction to a traumatic crisis. Mediating factors include:

- **Prior experience with the same or a similar event.** The emotional effect of multiple events can be cumulative, leading to greater stress reactions.
 - **Intensity of the disruption in the survivor's life.** The more the survivor's life is disrupted, the greater his or her psychological and physiological reactions may become.
 - **Meaning of the event to the individual.** The more catastrophic the victim perceives the event to be, the more intense will be the stress reaction.
 - **Emotional well-being of the individual and the resources that he or she has for coping** (especially social resources). People who have had other recent traumas may not cope well with additional stresses.
 - **Elapsed time since the event.** The reality of a traumatic event takes time to "sink in."
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Working With Survivors' Trauma

When working with survivors, you will see a range of responses that will vary from person to person. As you work with survivors, keep in mind:

Don't take survivors' attitudes personally!

The responses that you see will be part of the psychological impact of the event. A survivor's negative response may not relate to anything that you have done or have not done.

The CERT Psychological Role

As a CERT member, your on-scene psychological role is to stabilize the incident scene by stabilizing individuals.

The following are four ways that you can help stabilize an incident scene:

- Assess the survivors for injury and shock.
 - Involve uninjured people in helping.
 - Provide support by listening and empathizing.
 - Help survivors connect to natural support systems.
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Assessing Survivors for Injury and Shock

First, address any medical needs that the victim has.

As you learned in earlier lessons, life-threatening conditions—including shock—are identified during triage and treated immediately. Other medical needs are identified during the head-to-toe assessment and should also be treated.

Involving Uninjured People in Helping

Focused activity helps to move people beyond the initial impact of the event.

Giving survivors constructive jobs to do, such as running for supplies, is a good way to channel their energies in a positive direction.

Providing Support

Provide support to victims by listening and empathizing.

- Listen to them talk about their feelings and their physical needs. Victims often need to talk about what they've been through, and they want a listener.
 - Empathize with victims. Victims want to know that someone else shares their feelings of pain and grief. Show by your responses that you hear their concerns.
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What Not To Say

When listening to and empathizing with trauma survivors, avoid the following types of responses. Although such phrases are meant to comfort the survivors, they do not show an understanding of the person's feelings. These types of responses could elicit a strong negative response or could distance the survivor from you. (And remember, it is okay to apologize if a survivor reacts negatively to something that you said.)

What Not To Say (Continued)

Avoid Saying:

"I understand."	In most situations, we cannot understand unless we have had the same experience.
"Don't feel bad."	The survivor has a right to feel bad and will need time to feel differently.
"You're strong." "You'll get through this."	Many survivors do not feel strong and they question if they will recover from the loss.
"Don't cry."	It is okay to cry.
"It's God's will."	Giving religious meaning to an event to a person that you do not know may insult or anger the person.
"It could be worse." "At least you still have..."	It is up to the individual to decide whether things could be worse.

Connecting to Support Systems

An important way to help stabilize an incident scene is to help survivors connect to natural support systems. Support systems may include:

- Family.
 - Friends.
 - Clergy.
 - Mental health professionals.
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Working With Bereaved Family Members

As a CERT member, you may sometimes be called upon to interact with family members in relation to the death of a loved one.

Managing the Death Scene

Below are some guidelines for interacting with family members about the death of a loved one:

- Cover the body and treat it with respect. Wrap mutilated bodies tightly.
 - Have one family member look at the body. Ask the individual to decide if the rest of the family should see it.
 - Allow the family to spend time with the deceased. Stay close by, but don't watch. Try to distance yourself emotionally.
 - Let the family grieve. Don't try to comfort them out of a need to alleviate your own discomfort.
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Informing Family Members of a Death

If the family does not know of the death of their loved one, you may be called upon to tell them. When informing the family:

- Separate them from others in a quiet, private place.
 - Have them sit down, if possible.
 - Make eye contact and use a calm, kind voice.
 - Tell them about the death using the following words: "I'm sorry, but your family member has died. I am so sorry."
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Lesson Summary

- To limit the effects of vicarious trauma on yourself, don't overidentify with survivors, monitor your own reactions, and use stress reducers that work for you.
 - Traumatic stress may affect a survivor's cognitive functioning, physical health, and interpersonal relationships.
 - When working with survivors, your role is to stabilize the incident scene by stabilizing individuals.
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