During and After a Disaster

About the Print Version

This print version of the module includes all the substantive content from each screen, except for the Check Your Understanding exercises and the final quiz. The workbook, which is referenced throughout the module, is available online.

Organizational Steps

Organizations are responsible for setting goals to help promote resiliency for themselves as well as for their employees in case of a public health emergency. The steps that organizations take to prepare themselves and their workers can affect the internal structure of the organization, its policies and procedures, as well as enhance their ability to respond in a disaster.

Leadership and Management Structure

Creating an effective leadership and management structure is one of the key steps an organization can take to help ensure they will be able to demonstrate resiliency during and after a disaster. A few characteristics of an effective leadership/management structure include having clearly defined:

- Chain of command: Who holds primary responsibility for day-to-day operations? For disaster response operations? Is it clear who each employee reports to, and how? A clearly defined chain of command means there will be less confusion during a disaster.
- Organizational goals and purposes: What is the most important function of the organization that must be maintained? What guiding principles will the organization follow during a disaster response? Clearly defined organizational goals mean that critical functions are more likely to be preserved during a disaster response.
- Disaster response roles: Are the standard roles still applicable? Do people need to be cross-trained in other roles?
- Emergency operating procedures: What changes to standard operating procedures need to occur during an emergency? How will employees learn what procedures to follow?
- Continuity of operation plan: How is the organization going to continue to function during and following a disaster?

See Exercise 1 in the Workbook to identify the changes that may occur in your job description during a disaster or emergency response.

Leadership Training

Effective leaders are invaluable in any disaster response scenario. Effective leaders help communities and emergency responders react quickly and effectively to minimize the damage and trauma of a disaster. Leadership training can help improve the skills that leaders will need to effectively respond to emergencies. Leaders need to be:

- Knowledgeable in terms of their emergency job tasks and functions and empathic in terms of understanding the personal and emotional needs of their subordinates.
- Skilled in logistics, communication, and in executing organizational emergency response protocols.
- Familiar with the National Incident Management System and the Incident Command System. Online courses on these topics are available on the FEMA training Web site, accessible through the Toolkit.

Organizations can help their leaders develop these qualities by supporting various types of training opportunities including leadership institutes, emergency response training, and participation in tabletops and disaster exercises.

Team Support

In addition to developing skills to help them lead during a disaster, organizations and their leaders are responsible for building effective teams who can maintain resiliency and carry out disaster and emergency responses. There are a variety of steps that organizations can take to help their teams succeed when the next disaster hits:

- Building effective teams. These teams may be naturally occurring work teams or functional teams that assume ICS (Incident Command System) roles during a disaster. Team building requires practice and a focus on mutual goals. Team building may also include cross-training so that teams can continue to function even if one or more members is unavailable.
- Promoting stress management: Stress management is important on an individual level because excessive stress can impair an individual's ability to respond effectively in a disaster. As such, stress management must be considered an essential job skill for public health workers, which means it must be addressed through hiring, training, job assignments, and performance reviews for public health workers. Making stress management a daily factor in a worker's life will make managing stress part of the organizational culture.

- Practicing the buddy system. The buddy system is a formal assignment of a partner or buddy who will work with you and watch out for your well-being. A buddy system is important, especially in a disaster, as individuals may not be able to judge when they are responding sub-optimally or are in danger. A buddy system needs to be adopted as a formal protocol in a disaster response and practiced during exercises.
- Establishing and identifying pre-existing community support resources. These may include mental health resources such as those provided by the American Red Cross for disaster responders and rescue workers.

See Exercise 2 in the Workbook to design a buddy system for use in your organization's disaster response.

Maintaining Resiliency During an Event

Organizations can also institute several steps and put various measures into place to help workers maintain resiliency during a disaster response:

- Including a pre-incident briefing. When a disaster is in progress, it is important that responders have a good idea of what they're going to experience and be dealing with before they are deployed. In situations where people have been unprepared for the massive casualties they were about to face, higher rates of adverse mental health outcomes like depression and posttraumatic stress disorder have been reported.
- Implementing an Incident Management System that is consistent with the National Incident Management System so that response efforts can be coordinated among responding agencies.
- Rotating personnel so they cycle through the most intense exposures (e.g., to handling bodies) with the goal of minimizing the effects on any one individual by limiting the exposure times.
- Enforcing reasonable shifts and frequent breaks. In many cases, the adrenaline or importance of the event will take over and the disaster workers may not realize that they are fatigued or overwhelmed and so the organization will need to enforce time away from the scene.
- Advising responders of the availability of mental health services. These mental health service professionals should be trained and versed in the needs of disaster response personnel.

Preparing for Known Issues

Another step that organizations can take before any disaster is to prepare for known issues. Known issues are those issues that have clearly been highlighted as problematic in prior disaster responses or exercise scenarios. By identifying these issues before a disaster strikes, organizations can take steps to mitigate these problems. The examples on the following pages are from a brainstorming

session around pandemic flu planning. These may help you identify potential problems that could negatively affect your organization's ability to respond during an actual flu pandemic. Do any of these apply to your organization?

Distressed or Angry Individuals

Civil unrest during a disaster response is rare. Instead, you are more likely to see distressed or panicked, or even angry individuals who may impede disaster response work. One solution for distressed or panicked individuals is simply to move them to a designated separate area, if possible, to prevent their panic or distress from spreading to others and then simply to work with them one-on-one as you would any other affected individual.

Unfortunately, angry people can be more difficult. If you are forced to tell someone that they are not eligible for a medication and they feel that it is a matter of life and death, they may get hostile. Having security available is essential to protect the disaster response workers as well as other members of the public and it can have a generally quieting influence on all of those present in the venue.

Inconsistent or Ineffective Communication

If different responding agencies are providing different messages to the community, confusion can ensue as people try to decipher or respond to potentially conflicting messages. A Joint Information Center (JIC), or a single spokesperson/group for all of the agencies, functions as a way to disseminate information about the event (what is happening, where supplies are available, etc.) and can cut down on the confusion.

Making sure that risk communication is timely, clear, and credible is important as well. On one end of the spectrum, communications about heath issues can be so dire that, in addition to the people who actually need help, medical centers can be overwhelmed by the worried well. These are people who do not need medical attention but think that they do, or those who are psychologically impacted, whose main need is reassurance or crisis management rather than medical care. On the other hand, health risk communications should not downplay the risk so much that those who actually need assistance don't see the needed care.

Did You Know?

An example of how ineffective communication can literally cause the disaster outcomes to be much worse comes from the Three Mile Island incident in Pennsylvania in 1979.

Metropolitan Edison, the company responsible for the nuclear power plant, was unsure of the extent of the damage and risk immediately following the incident. However, instead of acknowledging the uncertainty or erring on the side of caution, they issued communication indicating that everything was OK. When it wasn't, they had to increase the severity of risk in their communications, which led to much wider-spread anxiety in the surrounding communities.

Ineffective Volunteers

In times of crisis, the problem usually isn't a lack of volunteers, but rather the emergence of "spontaneous volunteers" who are not necessarily well trained. Often there isn't time during a disaster response to train these spontaneous volunteers. However, developing "just-in-time" training for volunteers and systems can help organizations use volunteers more effectively. Just-in-time trainings can be quick and easy to coordinate if they are developed ahead of time and address key volunteer tasks.

Also, developing a catalogue of potential volunteers and their skills can be useful. If volunteers register ahead of time, an organization can select and call specific volunteers based on the specific skills needed during an emergency response.

Did You Know?

One of the most common ways that people attempt to vounteer, especially when they aren't being used in other efforts, is to give blood. However, this is not always a helpful choice.

According to the US General Accounting Office (GAO), in the weeks immediately following September 11, blood collections increased nearly 40 times above normal levels for that time of year. Because only a small amount of blood was needed to treat the survivors of the attacks, a nationwide surplus developed. That surplus, in turn, stressed the collection system. The GAO estimates that about five times the usual proportion of units of blood became outdated and had to be discarded in the months following September 11.

Turning volunteers away from blood banks and towards other pre-designed volunteer activities may have been a more effective solution.

Unsanitary Conditions

If there is a pandemic flu that incapacitates a community, the build-up of garbage and medical waste may present a real problem. Deciding on strategies beforehand for dealing with those unsanitary conditions can help keep the entire community and facility more sanitary.

The possibility of unsanitary conditions is not limited to a medical emergency. During any kind of natural disaster, trash collection and other key services will likely be limited or suspended entirely. Is your organization prepared to deal with the build-up and unsanitary conditions that can occur?

Did You Know?

Lengendary nurse Florence Nightingale was the first to recognize the importance of having sanitary care conditions when treating the ill or wounded.

While Nightingale believed that infection arose spontaneously in dirty or poorly ventilated areas, her push to clean up and ventilate hospitals changed the standards of cleanliness and saved thousands of lives.

Ineffective Crowd Control Strategies

During a natural disaster or public health emergency, crowds can build up in a variety of locations, from emergency response centers to any public gathering place. If those who are infected or sick cannot quickly reach the resources or treatments they need, they may transmit their infection to those around them in waiting rooms or other gathering places. Effective crowd control strategies, such as signs in multiple languages and flow monitors directing traffic, are needed to move people through emergency response facilities. Additional methods for limiting the amount of time that people are in contact with each other (such as recommending quarantines or suggesting that people stay home) may be required.

Did You Know?

In a functional exercise developed to simulate the mass dispensing of antibiotics after an anthrax attack, simply adding additional signs and volunteer flow monitors cut the amount of time needed for one person to get through the line from 40 minutes to 12 minutes.

Worried Well

Individuals who are not actually sick but who think they are and respond accordingly or those who are psychologically impacted, whose main need is reassurance or crisis management rather than medical care, are referred to as the worried well. The problem is that these worried well individuals may consume medical resources and block access for those who are actually sick or in danger. For example, after the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system

in 1995, the United States Department of Defense indicated that for every one individual that actually had an exposure to the neurotoxin, four individuals sought care. This caused a huge drain on the medical resources that were available at the time.

Instead, one way to address the needs of the worried well and limit the resources they consume is to implement strategies to triage and educate them so that they only consume the resources they actually need, such as information and reassurance. Some strategies for education include public announcements, communicating health risks, or providing fact sheets. The fact sheets designed for the worried well generally include the signs and symptoms of exposure, methods of self-care (e.g., self decontamination protocols), information about the availability of antidote and other treatments, contact information, and Web site URLs with additional information and resources. Strategies for triage include monitoring them for symptoms, sending them to a separate holding area, and providing reassurance.

In some cases, the worried well may not be infected or ill, but the stress of the situation may have triggered mental health issues that will need evaluation and treatment by a mental health professional.

See Exercise 3 in the Workbook to identify ways your organization can prepare for some of these common issues that occur during a disaster response.

Maintaining and Increasing Personal Resiliency

Organizations can be extremely helpful at instituting policies and putting resources into place to help individuals maintain and increase their resiliency before and after an event. However, along with such organizational measures, the responsibility also falls on the individual to take care of himself or herself. In this section, you will learn about several strategies that you can implement to help maintain your personal resiliency during a disaster response.

Talking

During and after a disaster, talk to your team, your co-workers, and to people on site when you feel like it. Generally, researchers have found that people recover better and more quickly when they are able to talk about their experiences and their feelings, but it must be in their own time and way. Decide when and with whom you want to talk about your story. Research has shown that telling your story is one way to help resolve any remaining symptoms of trauma.

If you're uncomfortable talking with those around you, make use of other mental health, counseling, and crisis services that are available.

Professional Boundaries

While you certainly want to have some empathy with disaster victims, over-identifying with them can be emotionally overwhelming and draining. Maintaining a level of professional distance will help you to serve the disaster victims more effectively. This is partly a mental mindset but it can also help to avoid long periods of time with a single disaster survivor. Prolonged exposure to the suffering of a disaster survivor can result in an unhealthy bond and secondary traumatization. There are no set recommendations about how long an acceptable exposure is. Each responder much examine their own feelings and responses and act accordingly.

Remember, maintaining some distance is not a sign of being unsympathetic or unfeeling. Instead, maintaining a level of professional distance is the best way you can serve the victims.

Pace Yourself

It is important to pace yourself during a disaster response to ensure that you can continue to respond for as long as is necessary. Try to implement frequent rest breaks for yourself as mental fatigue can occur over long shifts, especially when you are over-stimulated by the disaster. Having a rotation schedule for your team, maintaining the buddy system, and taking breaks away from the site can also help you to pace yourself.

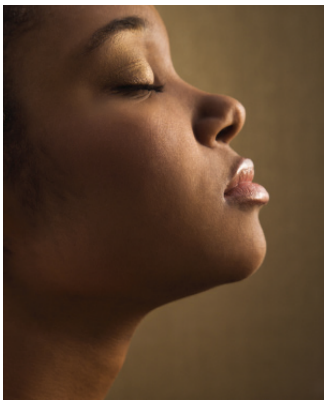
If you pace yourself, you are also better able to maintain an awareness of your surroundings which may keep you from rushing into a dangerous situation. There may be any number of hazards at any disaster site, but you may miss one or more when you first arrive on scene. Be conscious of your environment and warn others of hazards you have noticed.

DREAM

You may have learned about the DREAM acronym for stress management in previous workforce resiliency modules, but the key components of Diet, Relaxation, Exercise, Attitude, and Motivation are just as important in managing stress during a disaster response as in preparing for one. If you can maintain as normal of a schedule as possible in terms of both eating and sleeping this will help. If you can eat well-balanced meals and even squeeze in some time to exercise, your body will be better able to help you continue your disaster work.

You should also maintain a focus on why your work is important. Focusing on why your work is important and how you are helping others and your community over the long haul can help keep you going.

Acceptance



You may work as hard as possible and do everything right during a disaster response, but at some point, you will have to face and accept those things you cannot change such as casualties, fatalities, property damage, and emotional trauma. The harmful effects of the disaster on the community are things that you can help to mitigate but you cannot take away the very real damage that invariably occurs with disasters. By accepting that, you leave yourself more energy to help with those things that you can change.

After the Event

In the aftermath of a disaster, individuals are likely to experience a range of emotions and memories that are all normal. For example, most post-trauma symptoms are normal and may even be helpful. This sounds counterintuitive, but recurring thoughts of a disaster image or nightmares may actually be your brain's way of trying to process and better understand the traumatic event (as well as ways to avoid it in the future). These may only be a sign of a disorder if they begin to interfere with day-to-day life.

Another example of a standard response that will likely subside with time is that you, as a response worker, may be likely to be extremely worried about your family's well-being. You will see danger everywhere. You will want to ground your kids, take the car keys away from your teenager, and keep your spouse from going on that business trip. Just knowing that this is probably a normal overreaction that will rebalance over time will help.

In the rest of this section, you'll learn about some steps you can take to increase and maintain your resiliency in the period following a disaster.

Steps to Maintaining and Increasing Resiliency

Taking the steps outlined below can help you get back to feeling somewhat normal following a disaster response. In doing so, you may increase your own resilience as well as those around you. Some of these suggestions are ones that you've heard before, but some are likely to be new to you:

- Reach out to others. Acknowledging that people really do care for you, even if they can't directly relate to your experiences can be helpful. In firefighters who were exposed to a particular trauma, those who were married had half the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder as their colleagues who were single. This healing effect is probably not limited to marriage specifically but the study of firefighters serves to highlight the importance of having close family and friends that you can connect with.

- Continue to take care of yourself, aligning as closely as possible with the tips from the DREAM method. Relaxation during the recovery period will likely be a good idea so taking some extra time off to enjoy others and to recharge your batteries will help.
- Keep a journal. As a matter of policy, the Katrina volunteers in the Medical Reserve Corps were encouraged to keep a journal, many of which were then posted on their organization's Web site. Journaling can not only help you work through many traumatic stressful experiences, it can also help you to create a sense of community for those with similar experiences to your own.

- Don't make any major life decisions. In the time right after a disaster response, you may be exhausted and depleted. Your judgment may not be what you would want it to be to make any major decisions. Wait until you have had a chance to recuperate. While there is no body of scientific research supporting this recommendation, post-disaster fear and paranoia may distort risks and alter judgment. Wait until you feel you are back to "your old self" before making major decisions such as changing jobs or careers, leaving your mate, or moving.

Ongoing Care

Not all effects of a disaster show up immediately after the disaster response, so it is equally important to focus on resiliency over the long-term.

- Reconnecting with family: After a disaster, you should be mindful of the fact that in many ways, your family has gone through the entire disaster experience with you. The term "secondary traumatization" was coined to acknowledge the fact that individuals who were trying to help those directly traumatized often experienced their own version of the trauma. Support your family and help them to work through the trauma, just as you reach out to them for your support.

- Keeping an eye on those around you: The same principle applies to your co-workers and others around you. While you may not be able to provide the same level of support, keep tabs on co-workers as they return to their regular duties and ensure that everyone is aware of all available services.
- Avoid over-reliance on drugs or alcohol: In the aftermath of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks for instance, some responders and community members had a higher reliance on psychological drugs like tranquilizers and on alcohol. Over-relying on either drugs or alcohol can lead to addiction and can slow down or interrupt the post-disaster recovery process.

Summary

In this module, you've learned some strategies that both organizations and individuals can undertake to increase resiliency during and following a disaster. Organizations must have all of the necessary plans, people, and policies in place before a disaster. Individuals must also take responsibility for their own well-being and maintain their own resiliency. Taking these steps can help individuals and organizations to respond effectively in a disaster and to recover so that, when the next disaster comes, everyone is better prepared.