

## FACTORS AFFECTING STRESS AMONG DISASTER WORKERS

Various factors may influence a disaster worker's response to disaster. These factors may strengthen and support the worker, serving to mitigate or soften the emotional consequences of disaster, or they may put the worker at risk for stress reactions.

### A. FACTORS RELATED TO THE INDIVIDUAL

1. HEALTH. Poor health may place one at risk.
2. PREEXISTING STRESSES. Recent job change, move, family problems, divorce, etc., may place an individual at risk.
3. PREVIOUS TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES. Successful outcomes may have helped individuals develop coping and survival skills and strengths. Unsuccessful outcomes or emotional reactions that have not been worked through may leave individuals vulnerable to strong emotional reactions.
4. COPING SKILLS. A repertoire of effective coping skills can reduce risk.
5. PRIOR DISASTER EXPERIENCE. Cumulative stress from prior rescues may leave one at risk if feelings have not been worked through. On the positive side, cumulative experience may season workers and desensitize them to traumatic stimuli.
6. IDENTITY AND SELF-EXPECTATIONS. High self-expectations as a helper and rescuer can put workers at risk for a sense of failure and lowered self-esteem if rescue efforts are unsuccessful.
7. PERCEPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE EVENT. A worker's perception that an incident could have been prevented, for example, will likely result in strong feelings of anger or bitterness in the worker.

### B. INTERPERSONAL FACTORS

1. STRENGTH OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM. Family, friends, coworkers, and others constitute support that can affect worker risk.
2. PREEXISTING STRESSES IN RELATIONSHIPS. Marital problems and family difficulties may place an individual at risk.
3. EXPECTATIONS AND NEEDS OF OTHERS. Family members needing care, such as children at home alone or relatives with health problems or disabilities, may add to a worker's stress.
4. STATUS OF FAMILY MEMBERS IN DISASTER. If family members are separated at the time of disaster and the worker is unsure of their well-being, or if the family falls victim to the disaster, the worker suffers additional stress and role conflict.

### C. COMMUNITY FACTORS

1. SIZE OF COMMUNITY. In small communities, where victims and workers know each other, workers may experience higher self-expectations about their helping. Public expectations may also be higher, with citizens wanting special consideration or treatment, thus increasing stress and conflict for workers.
2. PREVIOUS DEGREE OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY. Communities that were cohesive and supportive of its members predisaster recover more quickly and its workers experience less stress than communities with a high degree of social conflict.
3. PRIOR DISASTER EXPERIENCE. Communities that have been through a similar experience often adapt and function more quickly, with workers and community members working more easily and cooperatively together than the first time.
4. AMOUNT OF SOCIAL DISRUPTION DUE TO DISASTER. The greater the damage to roads, communications, hospitals, public utilities, supply lines, and normal community services, the more stress exists for victims and workers alike.