

Module 9: Behavioral Health

Objectives

- Define common behavioral health reactions to emergencies
- Identify people most at risk and ways *MA Responds* volunteers can help

Overview

Behavioral Health addresses our ability to function as individuals, families, institutions, and communities. The purpose of a Behavioral Health Response is to mitigate the emotional consequences that may occur through prevention and intervention.

In most situations trained behavioral health responders will be available to address the emergent and ongoing stress related needs of people affected by the event as well as the emergency personnel responding to the event.

Trained behavioral health responders include mental health professionals, substance abuse professionals as well as paraprofessionals with behavioral health skills.

Common Behavioral Health Reactions to an Emergency

People experience common reactions to emergencies; everyone who sees or experiences an emergency is affected differently by it. A range of feelings including profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event.

The following are common symptoms to a traumatic event. These symptoms can be felt by victims, first responders, or those not directly affected.

- Difficulty concentrating; limited attention span
- Disorientation or confusion
- Depression, sadness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Mood-swings and easy bouts of crying
- Physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Poor work performance
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt



People Most Likely at Risk

Some people are at greater risk than others for developing sustained and long-term reactions to a traumatic event. People who have a higher risk of suffering long term effects include:

- People who have had direct exposure to the event; closer exposure to the actual event leads to greater risk
- Victims of the event; people who were physically injured
- People who have witnessed death or serious injury
- People with a history of trauma
- Those with chronic medical illness or psychological disorders



When to Get Further Assistance

If someone experiences emotional symptoms for an extended period of time or if the symptoms interfere with their ability to function, crisis counseling or stress management may be helpful.

Immediate help is needed if the affected person...

- is having life-threatening symptoms
- is suicidal or homicidal
- is 'out of control'



How MA Responds Volunteers Can Help

In most situations trained behavioral health responders will be available to address the emergent and ongoing stress related needs of people affected by the event as well as the emergency personnel responding to the event. However, other emergency responders can support those affected using these guidelines:

Do say:

- These are normal reactions.
- Your feelings are understandable.
- The way you feel right now does not mean you are going crazy.
- Things may never be the same, but you won't always feel the way you do right now.

Don't say:

- It could have been worse.
- You can always get another pet/car/house.
- It's best if you just stay busy.
- I know just how you feel.
- You need to get on with your life.



Self-Care Tips

You too will be under stress and it is important to take care of yourself so that you stay focused and are better able to care for others. During an emergency it is important to:

- Pace yourself; take frequent rest breaks away from your work area as much as possible.
- Drink plenty of water and eat healthy snacks such as fruit and whole grain products.
- Talk to supportive co-workers and supervisors about your experience.
- **Recognize and accept what you cannot change**—the chain of command, organizational structure, waiting, equipment failures, etc.
- Stay in touch with your family and friends.



Getting Help for Yourself

Behavioral health counseling is helpful to many emergency responders. If the following symptoms continue beyond a few weeks, seek professional help:

- Persistent and intrusive memories or thoughts about the event
- Numbness
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Feelings of Helplessness
- Difficulty concentrating



Training for Behavioral Health Responders

Currently Massachusetts has no unified, statewide training system for disaster crisis counselors. All MA Responds and State volunteers are encouraged to take training in Psychological First Aid, commonly referred to as "PFA".

The following is a description of resources and trainings offered through the State:

Medical Reserve Corps Psychological First Aid (PFA) training

NACCHO on-line Psychological First Aid Self Study
http://pfa.naccho.org/pfa/pfa_start.html

Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP)

The Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP) is one of a number of programs funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) under the authority of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1974 (Stafford Act). The Stafford Act was designed to supplement the efforts and available resources of State and local governments in alleviating the damage, loss, hardship, or suffering caused by a federally declared disaster. Specifically, section 416 of the Stafford Act authorizes FEMA to fund mental health assistance and training activities in affected areas for a specified period of time. This mental health assistance is called crisis counseling. More information is available on-line at:

<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA09-4373/SMA09-4373.pdf>

References and Resources

Helping Patients Cope with A Traumatic Event
CDC, Department of Health and Human Services

https://www.cdc.gov/masstrauma/factsheets/professionals/coping_professional.pdf

At-Risk Individuals, Behavioral Health & Community Resilience (ABC)
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response

<https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/abc/Pages/default.aspx>

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Pace yourself; including frequent rest breaks.<input type="checkbox"/> 4. Talk to co-workers and supervisors about your experiences.<input type="checkbox"/> 5. All of the above |
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Correct Answers

9.1: 1

9.2: 3

9.3: 4

9.4: 5