

## STRESS MANAGEMENT IN MORTUARY AND DEATH CARE OPERATIONS DURING INFECTIOUS DISEASE OUTBREAKS

Infectious disease outbreaks can cause considerable uncertainty, fear, disruption, economic hardship, sickness, and death. Exposure to human remains can be stressful. The guidelines below will help you manage your stress and increase adaptive coping. These guidelines are applicable to inexperienced and experienced mortuary personnel, medical staff, first responders, military service members, and those planning for current or upcoming mortuary operations.

In your work, you may see, smell, and handle the remains of individuals of all ages. Working with or around remains may arouse strong feelings of pity, horror, repulsion, disgust, and anger at the senselessness of the

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tragedy. You may feel guilty for not helping enough. These reactions are normal and a part of being human. You may feel emotionally numb, or you may even use “graveyard humor” to make the suffering and death less terrible. These are also normal responses. Strong emotions

or reactions may be most painful when working with the remains of children, or when the remains remind you of someone you know or of yourself.

Here are lessons learned by other people who have worked with remains in disasters. Although these tips cannot make a horrible event easy, they will help you continue to work and to live with your experiences and memories without being haunted by them:

### Prior to Mortuary Operations

- It is normal to feel some apprehension about the work that you will do and what you will see. Seek information from your supervisor about what you will be asked to do.
- Talk with your supervisor about the risks of infection.
- Learn to use personal protective equipment properly and practice risk reduction behaviors:
  - » Use universal precautions for blood and body fluids.
  - » Disinfect or dispose of infected gloves and protective equipment according to policy.
  - » Prevent cross-contamination of personal items including shoes.
  - » Disinfect commonly touched surfaces, equipment, and vehicles.
  - » Wash hands thoroughly after handling remains and before eating.
- Talk with your supervisor about your prior experience

with death and work with remains. This may help in the formation of effective work teams.

- Ask questions and seek guidance on any aspects of the work you may be concerned about. Others may have the same concerns.

### During Mortuary Operations

- Minimize exposure to the remains and the associated unpleasant sensory stimuli.
  - » Keep remains covered using partitions and body bags. Avoid looking at the face and hands. Remind yourself that bodies are not people anymore — just the remains.
  - » Avoid imagining what the person’s last moments might have been like.
  - » Unpleasant smells may become associated with the experience of working with the dead. Masks or using masking smells like Ben-Gay and breathing through the mouth may be helpful in diminishing unpleasant smells.

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- Minimize exposure to personal effects of the deceased, e.g., watch, wallet, photos that can evoke thoughts about the deceased's life and possibly feelings of loss and grief.
- Be compassionate but avoid focusing on any individual remains—especially those you may identify with. Remember the larger purpose of your work. Through your work with the dead, you are showing care, giving hope, and preventing disease for the living.
- Talking with others while working and during down time is very important. It keeps the mind from dwelling on troublesome thoughts. Humor is a good stress release. Humor can be a good release of stress, but it should not get out of hand or be used outside of the work group.
- Help others in distress by being a good listener. Don't mistake expression of feelings for weakness. Remind others that strong emotions are normal and honorable. Assist a distressed individual in seeking professional help if needed.
- Take frequent breaks, maintain hygiene, drink plenty of fluids, and eat good food. Facilities for hygiene and laundry should be available.
- Remember that the work you do will be important to others. Families may find comfort in knowing you cared for their loved one respectfully. Your work will also help families to prepare for funerals, monuments, or memorials for their loved one.
- It is okay to say silent prayers, but let local religious leaders conduct memorial services or more public ceremonies.
- Be respectful of local cultures and religious beliefs that may be very different from your own.
- Keep your supervisor informed of the work that you do and coordinate with the local authorities requesting assistance.
- As time allows, have your team get together for mutual support and encouragement.
- Acknowledge horrible aspects of the work, but do not dwell on memories of the details. You should let your supervisor know if an aspect of your work is particularly difficult or stressful for you — a job change may be helpful.
- When not working, get adequate sleep, exercise, do enjoyable activities, and stay in touch with family and friends.

### **After Mortuary Operations**

- Do not feel guilty about having mentally distanced yourself from the suffering or tragic deaths of individuals.
- Strange dreams or nightmares, feeling tense, or having intrusive memories are common during or shortly after stressful work with human remains.
- Sharing your emotional reactions with loved ones is often helpful, but may be difficult to do.
- If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties, or irritability persist more than two weeks after your return home, you should seek assistance from a counselor or a physician.
- Operational group meetings after the event provide the opportunity for team members and supervisors to review their experiences and develop lessons learned to enhance future performance.