Providing Emotional and Physical Support:

Helping the Helpers in Times of Crisis

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As floodwaters rise and later recede, hundreds of people will be working actively on the front lines of disaster. Those people are the professional and volunteer helpers. They may include Red Cross volunteers, city officials, National Guard troops, fire and police department workers, health care workers and many others. The hours they serve are often long, continuous and exhausting.

The emotional and physical needs of those who help others are often forgotten during crisis. They may not consider their own needs, or they may simply be too occupied with other responsibilities to handle personal or family needs. Helpers sometimes seem to be invulnerable to fatigue, stress, frustration and depression. Perhaps the demand is so great they think they can muster through. But helpers need help, encouragement and assistance, too.

The uncertainty of when recovery will begin and when intense commitments will end creates anxiety for both volunteer and professional helpers. Crisis produces a wide range of stress symptoms among helpers that can appear immediately, in a few hours or within days of the event. Disaster helpers may experience:
- poor concentration
- memory problems
- poor attention span
- disrupted work-sleep-eating patterns
- withdrawal
- loss of emotional control
- fear, guilt and anger
- grief and depression

Elizabeth O’Halloran, a Canadian Red Cross nurse, says, “It’s important that we’re not isolated. It’s easy to stay at our stations (during the disaster) from morning to night and never leave. I have had to force myself to remember to eat and to rest at night.”

O’Halloran, a professional helper who staffs disaster centers, identified that helpers can have difficulty keeping track of days and events, and that they often have a need to enforce structure and to “see normal life outside the disaster.”
Helpers Can Help Themselves

Helpers need to take care of themselves. Also, taking care of themselves makes it much more likely they will have the emotional and physical resources to help others. But that can be difficult for those who really enjoy what they are doing. These basic principles can help those helping on the front lines to stay in the race:

- get some sleep
- eat well-balanced meals as much as possible
- set up and maintain a structured routine, if possible
- learn to say no without feeling guilty
- take time for pleasure or “stress breaks”
- change your environment; take short breaks
- seek normality
- realize when a situation or problem should be referred to another helper
- delegate tasks to others or call for additional support if needed
- be aware of your energy limits; stop when these limits have been reached
- prioritize your time
- know your strengths and weaknesses
- communicate with people who understand your endeavor
- practice optimism and humor

We Can Help Helpers

Volunteer and professional helpers can use help from people not directly affected by crisis. “Community spirit and caring helps (helpers),” O’Halloran says. Connection to others and appreciation are important. Specific ways to help helpers:

- help with everyday tasks that are routine
- invite helpers to talk about their experiences
- help helpers accept help; offer something specific instead of “call me if you need anything”
- do not rush helpers; their sense of time may be distorted
- reassure them that their stress is normal; most people recover well from stress
- when requested, provide information about the world outside the disaster
- respect their privacy
- encourage sensible health habits
- repeatedly show appreciation for the helper’s work
- take care of simple needs for helper, such as picking up a meal for them
- care for children, contact family members or do other things for a helper who is focused on disaster response
- provide a listening ear, a hug or other expression of support

To help communities recover after disaster, the load must be shared. Front-line professionals and volunteers plan, manage resources and make critical decisions during a disaster response. Provide support to them so that they can give support to others.

The experience of helping others may be enriching, but helpers also need to know that others are willing to stand with them and provide continuing support.

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