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Helping the Helpers in Times of Crisis or Natural Disaster

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The emotional and physical needs of those who help others are sometimes forgotten during a crisis or natural disaster. Helpers also need encouragement, assistance and support in such times.

The Needs of Helpers in Times of Crisis

As floodwaters rise and recede or storms damage communities, hundreds of people are often working actively on the front lines of disaster. These people are the professional and volunteer helpers. They may include Red Cross volunteers, city officials, National Guard troops, fire and police departments, health-care workers, Extension agents and many others. The hours they serve can be long, continuous and exhausting.

However, the emotional and physical needs of those who help others are sometimes forgotten during times of crisis and natural disaster. They may simply not consider their own needs or they may 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 demands placed on them are so great they think they can muddle through without consequences to their health. However, helpers need help, encouragement and assistance too. Helpers need to take care of themselves to have the emotional and physical resources to help others.

Tips for Supporting the Wellbeing of Helpers

There are multiple tips for taking care of yourself and also supporting the emotional and practical wellbeing of helpers during times of crisis:

- **Get sufficient sleep.** Though hours might be long during a crisis or disaster, dedicate time to getting enough rest so that you or others can function with good skill and judgment.
- **Eat well-balanced meals as much as possible.** A healthy diet helps to fuel one's ability to respond during stressful times. Eating nutritious snacks can also help, and drinking enough water is important.
- **Set up and maintain a structured routine if possible.** A structured routine allows you to prioritize communicating clearly, making effective decisions and prioritizing needs in the community for action.
- **Take time for stress or relief breaks.** Small opportunities to recharge your emotional batteries can be very helpful during a crisis. Schedule in at least 5 to 10 minutes for stress or relief breaks each hour.
- **Change the physical stress environment by taking short breaks as possible.** Instead of being constantly in a high-stress environment, go for a brief walk, stretch, or get up and move so that you are not locked into unending physical stress for hours without a pause.
- **Seek normality.** Times of crisis warp or shift a person's normal reality. Remain grounded or help others do so by engaging in normal actions such as a few minutes of morning exercise, a cup of coffee or a healthy breakfast.

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- **Check in with loved ones regularly.** People you care about need to hear from you and you need to know that loved ones are physical and emotionally safe also. Keep a charging cable or fully charged power bank or portable charger with your cell phone during a disaster.
- **Realize when a situation or problem should be referred to another helper.** Part of effective crisis response is realizing when a situation is beyond your training or capacity, or knowing when you need more help and the challenge needs to be referred.
- **Delegate tasks to others or call for additional support if needed.** You might be the one to step up and take a burden off a helper's plate of things to do, or call in additional helping hands for a needed task.
- **Learn to say no without feeling guilty.** It can be common to turn to particular helpers for all the answers. If you are a person handling multiple issues in stressful times, learn to say no to additional responsibilities and focus on what you can reasonably do to help. Refer them to other helpers for assistance.
- **Be aware of your energy limits and stop when these limits have been reached.** Pay close attention to signs of physical or emotional exhaustion among helpers. Pushing the limits can put a helper's health or safety at risk, as well as the health and safety of those they are helping.
- **Prioritize your time.** Take a few minutes daily to review needs and consider where your time and assistance will be most helpful.
- **Know your strengths and weaknesses, as well as your specific roles as a helper.** Focus your energy and contributions on the strengths you have to offer. Also, concentrate your time on the specific tasks linked with your helping role or responsibility.
- **Communicate with people who understand your endeavor.** Support from others who have a clear awareness of your role and efforts can help with managing the burdens and feelings associated with helping in a time of crisis. Debrief regularly and use natural breaks such as getting a meal or snack to talk with other helpers about what you have encountered.
- **Practice optimism and humor.** These are essential ingredients to help with emotional stability and perspective during a crisis or natural disaster.

Conclusion

Volunteer and professional helpers responding to a disaster also can use help from people not directly affected by a crisis. Provide support to the helpers so they can give support to others. For example, make sure that their regular job tasks are covered or extend support to their family members as needed while they are away helping.

To help communities recover after a crisis or natural disaster, the load must be shared. The helpers involved need to know that others are willing to stand with them and provide continuing support. Such efforts can bolster morale of helpers, assist them in focusing on their helping efforts, and aid in maintaining their physical and mental health.

Resources

For related materials about dealing with stress and other information to aid in disaster response and recovery, visit the NDSU Extension disaster response Web site at: <https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/ag-hub/ag-topics/disasters>

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