

Factsheet 3

Stress after emergencies

In emergencies, people can use up more emotional energy than they realise. They put themselves into a survival state to deal with problems and cope with fears, frustrations and other feelings. The body's natural way of working outside the normal comfort zone in this way is called a 'state of stress'.

It means people can:

- focus on the important things
- concentrate and work hard for long periods
- put aside feelings in order to do what has to be done
- carry lots of details in their mind
- put their own needs aside and not feel hunger or fatigue
- while others are in need think clearly and quickly
- keep a step ahead of what is happening.

Being in a 'state of stress' uses a great deal of energy. People can usually keep going for as long as they need to but eventually they start to feel the effects of stress. They cannot maintain their energy level and come off the 'high' they have been on. It is at this time that people may start to display stress symptoms. The longer the emergency lasts, the stronger the symptoms are likely to be. Often they start while the emergency is on, but may be worse after it is over. This is the rebound to the extra efforts that have been made during the crisis. Stress is normal and natural, but needs to be understood so it does not cause further problems.

Common stress symptoms

Thinking

- trouble thinking clearly
- planning
- making decisions
- can't concentrate or remember details
- low attention span
- can't stop thinking about the issues all the time
- keep thinking about bad times in the past
- not speaking clearly, slurring words, forgetting names.

Physical

- bodily tension, stress and tightness in muscles
- weak feelings, tiredness, loss of energy and enthusiasm
- headaches, trembling, sweating, nausea, aches and pains
- lack of appetite, increased desire for stimulants, sugar, alcohol, tobacco or coffee
- feeling tired but cannot sleep, disturbed sleep, dreams and nightmares.

Feelings

- feel detached from things
- don't care any more
- irritable, bad tempered, impatient and restless
- unable to relax or keep still
- feeling overwhelmed
- everything seems too hard or difficult
- tearful for no reason
- easily upset or hurt
- oversensitive to what others do and say
- insecure - wanting to stay in familiar places with routines
- feeling very emotional
- experience waves of anger or worry that are not reasonable.

Relationships

- feel others are to blame for stress
- tendency to get things all out of proportion
- can't feel happiness enjoyment or affection for loved ones
- moody and gloomy
- feeling sad and hopeless as though the emergency will never end
- changed relationships with those close to you
- don't want to be with family or friends or always need them around
- have to talk about the emergency all the time
- feel others don't understand or don't seem to care.

Cumulative stress

The same effects can occur if the emergency is not dramatic, but a series of smaller problems that go on for a long time. If it is not possible to unwind and relax between the problems stress builds up.

The stress cycle

If stress has been ongoing, a pattern of stress may form. As a result, stress reactions cause more problems and this causes more stress. This is called the stress cycle. Once established, stress can become a lifestyle. Long term stress will undermine health and may cause illnesses. Getting over stress means breaking the stress cycle.

Breaking the stress cycle

Step 1. Recognise you are stressed

People often don't recognise their own stress because they are too focused on the problems. Listen to others who may see you more clearly than you see yourself.

Step 2. Get to know your stress cycle

Try to see how the stress symptoms cause more stress and put you in the stress cycle.

Step 3. Make a decision to break the stress cycle

Although there are lots of things about your life you cannot change there are ways some that you can, but you have to decide to do it.

Step 4. Reduce stress activities

Check your routines and life style to see where you can reduce the stress. Where possible stop doing things that keep stress high.

Step 5. Increase relaxation and positive activities

Build activities into the daily routine which break the stress cycle and give you a reward or good feeling, even if only a small one. Put a little effort in to enjoying yourself.

Looking after yourself

There are plenty of things that anyone can do which will help to break the stress cycle and reduce tension. Many simple pleasures will make a big difference to stress. Enjoyment is the best antidote to stress.

Physical

- Do regular rhythmic physical exercise such as walking, swimming, cycling
- Make an effort to reduce or at least not to increase your intake of stimulants such as alcohol, tobacco and sugar as they keep the stress cycle going
- Eat regular, well balanced meals even if they are small.

Relationships

- Keep regular contact with people you like to be with
- Ask for help when you need it, many people enjoy giving help
- Make time to be with your family or friends
- Talk to people you trust about yourself and what is happening so you can get it into perspective.

Relaxation

- Do regular relaxation exercises such as deep breathing, listening to quiet music, meditation
- Do something about bodily tension such as massage or exercises
- Rest regularly, even if you can only do it for a short time
- Try to find something that will make you laugh sometimes.

Attitudes

- Accept that it will take time to get out of the stress cycle and keep trying
- Be careful of accidents - concentration and judgement may be impaired under stress
- Try to be organised and efficient so you have some time to yourself.

Adapted from information issued by Queensland Health: Fact Sheets for Psychosocial Disaster Management