

## **Managing Traumatic Stress:**

### **For Journalists Covering Hurricane Katrina**

The psychological effects of a hurricane like Katrina may be long-lasting and the resulting emotional strain and stress may affect even veteran journalists assigned to cover the aftermath of the hurricane. It is common for journalists who have experienced traumatic situations through their work to have very strong emotional reactions. As a journalist, you already are required to work under tight deadlines and the pressure of being first to capture breaking news for your media organization. You are often expected to report on a variety of traumatic stories while remaining composed and working extraordinarily long hours.

However, when you're assigned to report on a major disaster such as hurricane Katrina while working and living directly in ravaged areas, you face additional stressors, similar to what first responders encounter, just from witnessing violence, death, homelessness, destruction of homes and towns, displaced populations, and people suffering emotionally and physically. Understanding common responses to these abnormal events can aid you in coping effectively with your feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and help manage stress and build your resilience.

#### **How should I help myself and my colleagues?**

Many journalists already possess the skills of resilience and will bounce back on their own, given time. There also are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional wellbeing and a sense of control.

- Give yourself time to bounce back from the stress of reporting on the disaster. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have witnessed. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the trauma.
- Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you - such as by talking with colleagues, family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- Find out about local support groups that often are available such as for those who have suffered from natural disasters. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems. Look for groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals such as psychologists. Group discussion can help you realize that others in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.
- Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. This can be especially important when the normal routines of daily life are disrupted. Even if you are on the road covering an assignment, establish a set of routines for times of travel that can bring comfort. When

you return home, schedule some time off. It's important to step away from the demands of daily life and pursue hobbies or other enjoyable activities.

-Help those you can. Helping others, even during your own time of distress, can give you a sense of control and can make you feel better about yourself. Consider reaching out to a colleague who may going through a tough time having covered the news from the disaster area.

- Avoid major life changes such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

- Recognize that your family or friends may not completely understand what you have gone through. Don't turn away from them or isolate yourself from them. Turn to them for support. They can help you reestablish your normal routines and gain a sense of perspective and equilibrium as well as act as a source of comfort and reassurance for you.

### **When should I seek professional help?**

Many people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily work and living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships.

Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about common responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

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