



B.C. SEARCH & RESCUE ASSOCIATION

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Emotional Health Issues for Families of Disaster Workers

by the American Red Cross

Someone very important to you and your family has just left on a disaster assignment. It is natural for you to be worried about the experiences and possible hardships he or she may face on assignment. Please be assured that the safety and well-being of your family member is as important to us as it is to you.

DEALING WITH STRESS:

Your family member has probably given you all the information available at the time of assignment. It may seem very scanty to you. That's because in the beginning stages of any operation we don't really know very much about where the need is the greatest and where we will require the particular skills your family member has to share. We often don't know what accommodations are available in the affected area, or even whether phone service has been restored.

For the disaster staff member, the beginning of any operation is a process of reporting as quickly as possible to a headquarters (which may change location as additional damage reports come in), to perform a function that may be changed as the needs of the operation change. The staff member may be reassigned once or many times to different towns during the assignment. It is a time of great confusion and considerable frustration, as we begin to meet the needs of disaster victims and affected communities. But one thing we can guarantee is that this is an opportunity unlike any other for disaster workers to find the satisfaction that accompanies helping others and stretching their own limits and potential.

We know that you will keep in touch with your family member as often as possible, and continue to make him or her feel like a part of the family at home. Friendships are formed quickly on disaster assignments, and workers look out for the welfare of each other as if they had been lifelong friends. But even with this sense of camaraderie, it is not the same as news and expressions of caring from home.

Should an emergency arise, the Disaster Services department at your local Red Cross chapter can contact the operation. We can provide work numbers for your family member, pass messages, or facilitate a compassionate release from the operation and provide travel home. Disaster workers usually work long hours with little time off. They are constantly exposed to scenes of destruction and the strong emotions of victims. The pace on an operation is accelerated so that the most assistance can be provided to the largest number of people in the shortest possible time so their recovery will not be extended and they can begin to resume a more normal life.

For more information: www.bcsara.com/cism



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RETURNING HOME:

When your family member returns home, he or she may need a little additional time to adjust to the "normal" pace of everyday life, and may require a few days' rest before picking up the total load of responsibilities carried prior to leaving. It will be important for your family member to be able to talk to you about what happened on the operation and the emotions that accompanied the work. He or she may be proud, frustrated, angry, sad, tearful, and happy all at the same time. It will take a little time for these conflicting emotions to sort themselves out.

He or she may seem preoccupied with the disaster experience, and may not seem to share your excitement, disappointment, or frustration about events at home. Please be assured that what has happened during the absence is as important as it always was; your family member has just been through an experience that tends to overshadow everyday events and put them in a different perspective when viewed against the enormity of the disaster.

All disaster workers return home with a conscious or an unconscious need to reassure themselves of the safety of their environment. And all workers feel they left something undone on the disaster operation. It is important that you greet your family member with the love and understanding that made you the type of family he or she could feel comfortable leaving in order to help others.

Disaster workers, even when they have served in a location that's not far from home, may have some difficulty readjusting to home life. This can create some conflicts and misunderstandings when they return. By sharing this information with you, we hope that the family reunion will be as joyful as you and your family wish it to be.

Red Cross in BC: "When an emergency or disaster strikes, the Canadian Red Cross may work in partnership with first responders, public officials, emergency managers, and alongside other voluntary sector organizations to provide vital services to the public. This assistance may come in the form of emergency food and clothing, emergency lodging, reception and information, personal services and family reunification services. If you have been affected by a personal disaster, such as a house fire, contact us at 1-888-800-6493. Otherwise, contact your closest service location for general inquiries."

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