



B.C. SEARCH & RESCUE ASSOCIATION

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

DEVELOPING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

SAR volunteer and rescue/emergency work can be psychologically stressful and also physically demanding. Usually there is not opportunity to warm up or prepare for the intense physical demands of these types of activity. As well, extended periods of strenuous physical activity combined with extreme mental stress can be followed by extended periods of inactivity while equipment and additional resources are brought in. Exercise and physical fitness are, therefore, extremely important.

Exercise

Exercise can improve one's state of health and help combat the negative effects of stress. It can strengthen the body's systems by developing the stamina and the endurance to respond to physical demands. Exercise also reduces the physiological arousal and muscle tension related to the stress response syndrome, encouraging the body to move from a state of tension (alarm) back to a state of relaxation.

A. Benefits of Exercise:

1. Physical benefits:

- increased efficiency of the heart and circulatory system
- improved pulmonary function
- reduced resting pulse and blood pressure
- reduced body fat and better control of body weight
- increased muscular strength and endurance
- increased immune response.

2. Physiological benefits:

- improved mood (hormones released in the brain and blood during exercise produce natural pain killers and mood elevators)
- decreased anxiety and hostility
- improved concentration, alertness and cognitive functioning
- improved sleep
- better appearance and improved self-esteem.

B. Types of Exercise

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1. Low intensity exercise can improve muscle strength, flexibility and endurance:
 - calisthenics: stretching and limbering up
 - isotronics: contracting muscles against a resistant object with movement, such as weight lifting
 - isometrics: contracting muscles against resistance without movement, such as pushing against a wall.
2. Aerobic exercise can strengthen the cardiovascular system and increase stamina:
 - sustained rhythmic activity of large muscle groups
 - running, jogging, swimming, dancing, bicycling
3. Competitive sports have the added benefit of providing an outlet for negative emotions such as irritability and anger.

Exercise and SAR Activities

SAR activities, excessive physical and psychological stresses are imposed on SAR members; exercise to provide fitness for handling these demands is important.

1. Participate in a regular exercise program to maintain physical conditioning necessary to manage the physical demands of the job and promote psychological strength and resources to cope with stress.
2. Whenever possible, do warm-up exercises before engaging in periods of intense physical activity; even a few simple stretches while waiting or during periods of inactivity would be beneficial.
3. During extended periods of inactivity, perform whatever exercises possible:
 - stretching, especially neck, shoulder and back muscles
 - isometrics, such as pushing hands together to contract and release muscles.
4. During prolonged involvement in SAR operations, it would be wise to exercise every day in one of the following ways:
 - calisthenics to release muscle tension
 - aerobics to release tension, maintain stamina, health and mood
 - sports to provide an outlet for tension and aggression

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- exercising with co-workers to build or sustain support systems during prolonged stressful emergency operations.
5. It is advisable to engage in a form of vigorous exercise (aerobics or sports) within 24 hours of a major operation or critical incident.

Nutrition

Search & Rescue, other Emergency activities, etc. place added demands on the body, increasing the importance of good nutrition. The physical activity and added strain of Search & Rescue and Emergency response functions increase the body's need for certain nutrients, while at the same time depleting other nutrients. A major problem during these types of operations is the disruption of eating schedules and the absence of nutritious meals.

Search & Rescue / response personnel either forget or ignore the need to eat because:

- there are too many tasks to be carried out;
- stress, adrenaline "fight or flight" reactions may mask or interfere with normal appetite signals;
- distressing sights, sounds or smells can destroy an appetite;
- food supplies may be disrupted.

Under ordinary circumstances, the body requires some 40 to 60 nutrients daily to maintain health. Stress imposes greater demands on intake: certain nutrients are essential for the body to function properly while under stress. Active or tense muscles produce a high level of lactic acid; calcium is needed to counteract it. A diet which is too low in calcium can cause an individual to feel anxious, irritable and fatigued. Vitamin C is essential to the functioning of the adrenal glands which help maintain alertness. Stress can deplete body reserves and increase the need for such nutrients as protein, calcium and vitamins C, A and B-complex. Food alone cannot make a person healthy, but good nutrition combined with regular exercise can assist in the management of stress and maintenance of health.

To sustain energy and obtain necessary nutrients during involvement in prolonged rescue/recovery operations:

1. Eat regularly, even if not hungry.

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2. Eat four to five times daily in small amounts. This will combat body stress and symptoms of hypoglycemia, provide a constant blood sugar and energy level and also help to prevent the discomfort of indigestion caused by working on a full stomach.
3. Develop a habit of carrying high energy, non-perishable foods. Fruit, dried fruit, granola bars, nuts and trail mix are good sources of energy and nutrients.
4. Maintain an adequate fluid intake, especially if exposed to heat. Carry water, juice or fluid with electrolyte supplements in a small, personal container.
5. Avoid caffeine, sugar, sweet pastries such as doughnuts, and fast foods that are high in fat and sodium.
6. Arrange to have the following readily available:
 - fruit and high protein snacks
 - decaffeinated coffee, tea, mineral water, fruit juices and milk.
7. Always carry a good vitamin/mineral supplement to be sure that the body is getting the nutrients it requires under less than ideal eating conditions.
8. Get away from the Search or Disaster site for meals:
 - A break is needed from response stimuli and interaction with family, friends, media, etc.
 - A calm, relaxed atmosphere can aid digestion as well as reduce muscle tension and other stress symptoms.
9. Try to eat meals with a friend or co-worker; interaction, support and humour can help emotionally as well as physically