As an involved and dedicated disaster worker, taking care of your mental health needs is important. Disaster work can be exciting and rewarding, but it is also demanding and stressful. You may be talking directly with survivors who have experienced loss, pain, and shock from the disaster. It is not uncommon for disaster workers to identify with the plight of survivors. In addition, disaster work itself is stressful. The hours are long, the pace can be hectic, and the demands are many. For some workers, the assignment goes on for many months.

There are some normal reactions workers may experience as a result of these demands. Generally, these reactions don’t last long, but sometimes continue for a while, even after your work commitment ceases. Any or all of the following reactions may occur, in any order of intensity:

- Mood Swings
- Loss of Temper/Irritability
- Tiredness/Fatigue
- Change of Appetite
- Difficulty Sleeping
- Cynicism/Negativity
- Self-Criticism
- Repetitious Thoughts
- Forgetfulness
- Sadness, Easy Tearfulness
- Tension/Axiety
- Headaches/Back Pains
- Nausea/Upset Stomach
- Difficulty Concentrating
- Insecurity/Guilt
- Changes in Sexual Energy

These temporary symptoms are a normal response. Many workers will have at least two or three of these symptoms. Acknowledging your feelings and stress, and even possible burnout, is the first step in feeling better. Other helpful things to do include:

- Respect the need to be patient with yourself and others.
- Be willing to talk about what happened and express your thoughts. Talking about the incident and your reactions is critical to healing and integrating your experiences.
- Share your feelings rather than holding them in. This will help you feel better about your experience.
- Draw on supports that nurture you during your time off. This may include friends, reading, recreation, religion, prayer, meditation and exercise.
- Don’t place yourself in the role of rescuer. Rather, be a helpful guide along the way.
- Take care of yourself physically: good diet, adequate sleep and rest and exercise will help you considerably.
• Be alert to emotional over-involvement with survivors. There is always some interplay of emotions in any intense human interaction. Sensitive disaster workers may take on the feelings of those they are talking with, feelings such as sadness, helplessness, and frustration.

• If needed, give yourself permission to spend some time alone after work, but don’t totally withdraw from social interaction.

• Keeping a journal can be helpful as a release. You may find writing a healing, and a creative and important reflection of your experience.

• Put something from home near your work-station and/or office.

• Stopping from time to time to take four or five deep, cleansing breaths, or stretching tight muscles is rejuvenating and relaxing.

• Change your approach from demanding certainty to accepting uncertainty. Rigidity in disaster workers is self defeating. Flexibility is supportive to yourself and the organization.

• Use the partner or buddy system. Develop co-worker support networks when you are under stress. Tell someone what your personal signs of stress are and let them remind you when you start “spinning-out”.

• Attend debriefing groups and stress education programs that may be offered.

• Speak with a stress or crisis management counselor if you have any questions.

**NEGATIVE COPING BEHAVIORS:**

Some destructive coping behaviors may undermine the quality of your own life during this period, as well as interfere with your ability to render the highest level of service. Some people justify their behaviors due to the stressful nature of this work. Such behaviors may include:

• Abusing alcohol or drugs; self medicating;
• Overeating or eating sugar and junk food snacks;
• Neglecting health and grooming;
• Becoming distracted, reckless and accident prone;
• Isolating oneself from social interaction.

Please take this sheet with you today and re-read it in the next few days. Remember, being aware of your feelings and sharing them is important in preventing stress, growing from your experiences, and easing the return to your usual routine when the job is over.