



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO HUMAN REMAINS IN MASS DEATH

In mass disaster relief operations, the role of relief workers can change. Though personnel may begin an operation expecting to provide food, shelter and care for other basic needs, they can ultimately become involved in recovering the remains of disaster victims. If this occurs, you are likely to see, smell, and handle the remains of men women and children of all ages. Working with or around them may arouse strong feelings of pity, horror, repulsion, disgust, and anger at the senselessness of this tragedy. You may feel guilty for not helping enough. These reactions are normal and a part of being human. You may feel emotionally numb, or you may even use “graveyard humor” to make the suffering and death seem less terrible. These are also normal responses. Strong emotions or reactions may be most painful when a victim is a child, or reminds you of someone you love, or of yourself. Even if you’ve worked in disaster environments before you may react differently here than you have in the past. Remember strong emotions are honorable and they confirm your humanity.

Here are lessons learned by other people who have worked with remains in disaster environments. Although these tips cannot make a horrible event easy they will help you continue to work, and to live with your experiences and memories without being haunted by them: Remember the larger purpose of your work.

- By recovering remains for identification and respectful burial you are showing care, giving hope, and preventing disease for the living. Your supervisor must be aware of all body recovery work that you do and coordinate with the local authorities requesting assistance in this important effort.
- It may be difficult to prepare yourself mentally for what you will see and do. Specific information about job requirements and the experience of others can be helpful.
- While on the job wear protective gloves and coveralls to reduce your risk of disease, take frequent breaks, maintain hygiene, drink plenty of fluids, and eat good

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food. Rest (off of your feet) when not working. Facilities for rest, washing hands and face, for showers and fresh clothes should be available.

- Talking with others while working and during down time is very important. This helps prevent getting lost in your own thoughts or emotions.
- Help others in distress by being a good listener. Don’t mistake expression of feelings for weakness. Remind others that strong emotions are normal and honorable.
- Humor is a good stress release. Even graveyard humor privately among friends may be helpful but this will be offensive to some. Do not be disrespectful toward the remains.
- Limit your exposure to remains as much as possible.
- Limit the exposure of others, also, by using screens, poncho curtains, partitions, covers, body bags, and barriers whenever possible.
- Since perfumes or aftershaves used to mask odors may trigger later memories, it may be better to breathe through your mouth than to use these items to cover up unpleasant smells.
- Be compassionate, but avoid focusing on any individual victim—especially those with whom you may identify.
- Personal effects found near remains may be important for identification. They may also become important reminders for surviving family members or loved ones so they should not be taken as souvenirs.
- Do not focus on personal effects more than necessary as this can be particularly distressing.
- Remind yourself that remains are not people anymore — just the remains.
- It’s OK to say silent prayers, but let local religious leaders conduct memorial services or more public ceremonies.
- Be respectful of local cultures and religious beliefs that may be very different from your own.

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- As time allows, have your team get together for mutual support and encouragement.
- Acknowledge horrible aspects of the work, but do not dwell on memories of the details. You should let your supervisor know if an aspect of your work is particularly difficult or stressful for you — a job change may be helpful.
- Afterwards, do not feel guilty about having distanced yourself mentally from the suffering or tragic deaths of individuals.
- Some people find debriefings with trained counselors helpful but others do not. Participation should be voluntary. Any group debriefings should be with people who shared your experiences.
- Strange dreams or nightmares, feeling tense, or having intrusive memories are common during or shortly after stressful work with human remains.
- Sharing your emotional reactions with loved ones is often helpful, but may be very difficult to do.
- If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties or irritability persist more than two weeks after your return home you should seek assistance from a counselor or a physician.



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