

STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR LEADERS AND SUPERVISORS OF MORTUARY AND DEATH CARE OPERATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The worldwide spread of the coronavirus has resulted in an unprecedented era of uncertainty, fear, disruption, economic hardship, sickness, and death. During a pandemic, many individuals are exposed to the dead. These exposures can be stressful and increase the risk for post traumatic reactions. The guidelines below describe ways to reduce stress and increase adaptive coping in individuals exposed to mass death, including training personnel for mortuary work.

Prepare personnel for what they are likely to see and what they will be expected to do.

Prior to Mortuary Operations

- If possible, practice the steps involved in the operation, including recovery and processing of remains and the paperwork required by the legal authorities.
- Mortuary personnel are likely to be apprehensive about what they will see and do. They may:
 - » Feel unprepared for what may be a novel work experience.
 - » Fear contracting the pathogen and spreading it to others.
 - » Worry about a lack of personal protective equipment.
 - » Feel overwhelmed by the number of deaths and remains.
- Prepare personnel for what they are likely to see and what they will be expected to do.
- Directly address the risks and fears of contamination from the remains.
 - » Most organisms in the tissues of dead bodies are unlikely to infect healthy persons.
 - » There may be a risk of transmitting infectious diseases through contact with blood and body fluids if workers are not wearing personal protective equipment.

- Train workers in proper use of personal protective equipment. Provide guidance on other ways to reduce the risk of infection.

- » Use universal precautions for blood and body fluids.
- » Disinfect or dispose of infected gloves and protective equipment according to policy.
- » Prevent cross-contamination of personal items including shoes.
- » Disinfect commonly touched surfaces, equipment, and vehicles.
- » Wash hands thoroughly after handling remains and before eating.
- Present information accurately, neither exaggerating risks nor ignoring questions and concerns.
- Ask workers about personal experiences with death and work with remains. Identify fears and if they are based on past experience or anticipation of the unknown.
- Explain that some remains can be emotionally difficult (e.g., remains of children).
- Provide clear lines of command authority and jurisdiction and ensure work site security.
- Adhere to cultural norms on site and have a consultant familiar with the local customs available.
- Supervisors should be familiar with administrative, medical, and legal documentation including preservation of evidence, custody of personal effects, and location and state of remains.

During Mortuary Operations

- Monitor personnel for signs of distress and provide support by being available to talk and providing mental health referrals as indicated.
- Visitors to the work site should not be permitted to interfere with the work.

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- Minimize exposure to the remains and the associated unpleasant sensory stimuli.
 - » Keep remains covered using partitions and body bags. Avoid looking at the face and hands.
 - » Unpleasant smells may become associated with the experience of working with the dead. Masks or using masking smells like Bengay, and breathing through the mouth may be helpful in diminishing unpleasant smells.
- Minimize exposure to personal effects of the deceased, e.g., watch, wallet, photos that can evoke thoughts about the deceased's life and possibly feelings of loss and grief.
- Exposure to family members of the deceased may increase emotional involvement and feelings of loss and grief in the mortuary worker.
- Vary tasks so workers can adjust their exposure, but avoid exposing workers to both remains and the life story of that person (via personal effects or interaction with family members).
- Encourage verbal interaction during work to help keep the mind from dwelling on troublesome thoughts. Humor can be a good release of stress, but it should not get out of hand or be used outside of the work group. Avoid allowing workers to become isolated.
- Pair experienced workers with inexperienced workers. When possible, pair workers by similar age, rank, and comfort in working together. Experienced workers should act as a mentor.
- Assign persons who have difficulty with remains to another task they can contribute to. These individuals often do not want to be dismissed, which may contribute to a sense of failure.
- Set a reasonable work schedule and make sure individuals do not overwork. Do not promise to accomplish the work in an unreasonably short time. Do not attempt to maintain any schedule longer than 8 hours per day.
- Ensure personnel take breaks and get out of the work area. Provide a rest area with food, fluids, and protection from news media and onlookers. Get workers off their feet during breaks.
- Encourage workers to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle: get adequate sleep, exercise, do enjoyable activities during free time, and stay in touch with family and friends.
- People can do very difficult things when they understand the importance of what they are doing. Remind personnel that their work will be important to others. Families may find comfort in knowing that their loved one was cared for respectfully. The work will also help families to prepare for funerals, monuments, or memorials for their loved one.
- Chaplains and counselors can provide spiritual support and counseling, and behavioral health teams may be available for visits. Provide points of contact in case individuals have questions or wish to seek professional help/support after the close of the event.
- Be aware of the personal needs of the worker and his or her family and facilitate communication between them. Brief families on the general aspects of the operation and tell them what they can do to support their family member.

After Mortuary Operations

- It is helpful to review with workers their accomplishments. Operational group meetings can help leaders and workers share their experience and provide the opportunity for lessons learned.
- Acknowledge that workers may experience “normal” reactions to a difficult event and the following can help reduce distress: food, rest, exercise, leisure activities, camaraderie, contacting loved ones, and the passage of time.
- It may be difficult talking about the experience — especially with people who were not part of the operation. This is to be expected and workers should do so only when they feel comfortable.
- Reinforce the positive aspects of the work, skills learned, and experience gained.
- Acknowledge and reward performance, including awards and commendations, but often what is most important is a sincere, “Thank You”!
- Allow workers some time off to relax and take care of business.