Stress Management for Emergency Responders
Understanding Responder Stress

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

Hi. I'm Dr. Leslie Snider with the Antares Foundation. This is the first in a series of four programs on stress management for individuals, teams, and agencies working in emergency and humanitarian aid settings. We will use the term "individual" or "responder" to refer to emergency responders, humanitarian aid workers, and personnel providing technical assistance in these settings.

In this program we will gain a better understanding of:
- Sources of stress in these settings;
- The potential consequences if we do nothing about stress for individuals and teams; and
- What we can do – the responsibilities of the individual, team, and agency in managing stress.

Stress is an inevitable part of emergency and humanitarian aid work. Some say, "If you go out in the rain, you should expect to get wet," but let's think about that in terms of the realities of this work.

Let's start by looking at sources of stress in the context of emergency and humanitarian aid work. Responders may live under the threat of constant danger in insecure areas, such as post-conflict zones. With a breakdown in police and security systems, dangers may also exist following natural disasters. Threats to well-being and health may include exposure to diseases from lack of clean water or insect-borne illnesses. With damaged infrastructure, there are also risks of accidents and other environmental hazards. Responders often need to adjust to a new climate, including exposure to heat or cold, and navigate an unfamiliar terrain. Responders may also experience challenges to their values, ideals, and beliefs, as they are exposed to massive human suffering and human carnage. Being unable to meet the needs of so many suffering people can be particularly difficult, as well as dealing with corruption or political tensions.

Let's look at stressors in the work environment. In the field, the work and living environment are often the same. Responders tend to work long hours and live within or close to their work site. Living conditions may lack many basic comforts, and responders may be housed together without space or privacy. There is often a lack of cultural or leisure activities for relieving stress. Although most responders experience an unusually heavy workload, some may find periods of inactivity which can also be stressful.

Team dynamics and relationships can often make or break a mission. There can be cultural differences between team members or between responders and beneficiaries. Personality conflicts may arise impacting how team members work together. As tensions run high, there may be conflicts between staff and supervisors around decisions in a rapidly changing situation.

Organizational factors can be a significant source of stress for responders. If they don't have adequate equipment and access to communication systems, they can feel isolated from outside information and supports. A responder may not have a clear job description, or their role may change once they are on the ground. Flexibility is crucial as they may be asked to do something out of their usual role or area of expertise. Unclear lines of authority and conflicts between the field team and headquarters are other potential sources of stress.

The role of the emergency or humanitarian aid worker is a special one. They have heightened responsibility for people in dangerous areas, and also may have to make life and death decisions in the midst of chaos. They may find it difficult to rest or relax given the pressures to respond quickly to the crisis. They may experience difficult emotions arising from their role: feelings of powerlessness when confronting massive devastation, or guilt from being spared harm, or being in the spotlight because of the suffering of others. Although responders may see themselves as heroes, for various reasons depending on the context, the beneficiaries may not perceive them that way. Responders may have to deal with anger about many issues over which they have no control, such as an overall lack of timely assistance by the aid community. They often face moral or ethical dilemmas in their work, and may be exposed to atrocity and human rights abuses. They have to deal with chronic uncertainty as the emergency situation changes daily.

Finally, deploying from one crisis to the next without rest is a common occurrence in emergency and humanitarian aid work – with often serious long-term consequences to the health and effectiveness of the individual.

Let's look at personal factors. Being far from family and friends is a huge stress – for the individual and their loved ones. Personal vulnerabilities may also influence stress for individuals, such as managing a chronic or acute illness in the field, previous traumatic experiences, or specific personal losses for responders who themselves are directly impacted by the emergency. Age and gender are also possible considerations. Some first-time responders may lack experience or confidence. Physical health or safety concerns are related to a responder's age and gender. For example, women in certain settings may need to be more cautious and aware of cultural norms for their own safety.

The personality and expectations of responders themselves can be a source of stress. Many feel they need to appear strong, and show they are capable of doing the job, even when the situation is overwhelming. They may feel immense pressures in terms of status and future work, and have high expectations to succeed in their mission. However, emergencies can really challenge those high expectations of what you can reasonably accomplish on the ground.

Last, but certainly not least, are family issues. Lack of communication with family and friends back home can cause worry for the responder and their loved ones. Also, family and home life don't stop just because a person is deployed. There may be ongoing stresses at home, such as illnesses among family members. A partner at home may not understand or be supportive of a mission, and also may become over-burdened with practical household issues, such as arranging child care.

We've looked at the various sources of stress for emergency and humanitarian aid workers; now let's take a moment to explain what we mean by stress. Stress is normal. It is inevitable in life and most certainly in emergency work. It is the response of the mind and body to a physical or emotional challenge, and occurs when the demands from the outside world are out of balance with our perceived ability to cope. But not everyone experiences and responds to stress in the same way. Two people encountering the same stress may have different perceptions of it and reactions to it. Not everyone returning from a deployment will feel distressed or have long-term emotional problems, but we can all learn to handle stress more effectively.

We will consider 3 types of stress:
- First: day to day stress. This baseline stress is caused by various sources of tension in our lives - personal, family, social - and may be increased by changes in our environment, such as the change in routines when responders get to the field, working with new people, and managing new information.
- Cumulative, chronic stress - or strain - results from an accumulation of various stresses inherent in the job.
- Critical incident stress, or shock, can result when people are exposed to extreme or traumatic events outside of the realm of normal, everyday human experience. Critical incidents can include accidents, kidnapping of aid workers, or witnessing or hearing about traumatic events happening to others.

What if we do nothing about stress management for emergency responders and humanitarian aid workers? Let's look at the potential consequences of stress for individuals, teams, and agencies. As we saw in the statistics in the introduction to this series, stress adversely affects a large number of humanitarian aid workers. One-third or more of returned responders show clinically significant signs of emotional distress, meaning severe enough to interfere with their functioning at work and in life.

The consequences for individuals may include the following signs of emotional distress:
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms,
- Vicarious or secondary trauma from hearing the stories of others,
- Burnout or compassion fatigue,
- Depression,
- Pathological grief,
- Anxiety,
- Psychosomatic complaints, and
- Interpersonal conflict, including marital or family problems.

Chronic stress is the most frequent type of stress for responders, given the nature of the job. Even small daily stresses can build up and cause strain. It can be kept within reasonable limits by good personal and team stress management, but if not well managed, it can lead to burnout.

Burnout is an emotional state due to long term stress, and is characterized by chronic emotional exhaustion, depleted energy, loss of enthusiasm and motivation to work, lowered work efficiency, a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, and pessimism and cynicism. Burnout in individuals will also affect the functioning of teams in the field.

Some of the signs include:
- Increased absenteeism and lateness;
- Interpersonal conflicts, such as scapegoating and clique formation in the team;
- Negative attitudes toward the workplace or colleagues;
- High turnover of personnel;
- Lack of individual initiative; and
- Difficulty for the team in making decisions and gaining consensus.

Overall, burnout causes a lowered work output and decreased quality of service. The signs of burnout in individuals and teams have consequences for the agency as a whole. Increased turnover of staff will increase the costs for recruiting and training new, skilled responders. As agencies lose staff to burnout, there is also a loss of expertise and institutional memory for operations in the field. More accidents and illnesses also result, with increasing health care costs. Burned out staff also make poor decisions and engage in behaviors that place both their own team and the beneficiaries at risk. Overall, staff suffering the effects of stress are less efficient in carrying out their tasks, making the overall mission less effective. Finally, there is the potential for increased legal liability for agencies who do not properly support staff with the unique stresses of this work.

What can we do? Let's talk about the responsibilities of the individual, the team, and the agency in managing stress. The next few slides indicate points of intervention over the course of emergency response. Practical strategies can be put in place for each of these points. First is prevention – sound policies and procedures will help to reduce the number and intensity of stressors experienced by staff in the field. Secondly, we can reduce the vulnerability of responders and increase their resilience through preparedness and training. Information is power, and also protects responders because they know what to anticipate in the field, and have given thought to how to respond to the stressors that they encounter. Thirdly, we can improve the ability of staff and supervisors to monitor the ongoing stress for responders in the field, and support positive coping strategies. Especially in the event of critical incidents, we can intervene to prevent the longer-term effects of stress. Lastly, we can provide ways for the agency to learn from each mission, and to provide support to the responder and their family as they re-enter their usual life.

We must remember that preventing, managing, and reducing stress and ensuring the well-being and "fitness" of responders for their mission is the responsibility of everyone involved. The individual, the team, and the agency are inter-dependent and they have responsibilities each to the other in good stress management and operational practices.

Strategies for stress management are most effective when they are put in place for all phases of the mission: pre-deployment, in the field, and at the end of the assignment. An effective system of stress management for an agency has measures that are pro-active in ensuring responders are in the best possible condition to do their job; routine in terms of having policies and procedures clearly in place; and responsive to stresses in individuals and teams so that they can quickly and effectively address critical incidents if they occur.

So they say, "If you go out in the rain, expect to get wet." We say, "If you go out in the rain, take an umbrella." There are many realities of emergency work that we can't control. Incidents do happen and the work is stressful, so put in place the measures to shield yourself and your staff as much as possible.

Additional programs in this series discuss practical strategies for individuals, team leaders, and the agency.

For further information and to download resources such as "Managing Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers: Guidelines for Good Practice," go to the Antares Foundation website at www.antaresfoundation.org.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.