When Disaster Strikes:

Self-care Following a Disaster Relief Operation

Leaving your home to serve a community in crisis is both a challenging and rewarding operation. Whether it's a devastating hurricane, aggressive wildfire or mass causality incident, IAFF members are ready to answer the call when disaster strikes. Being deployed for days or weeks at a time while tasked with performing critical functions (e.g., search and rescue, evacuation, humanitarian relief, damage assessment, restoration) in a devastated region can make readjustment to daily life a physical, social and emotional challenge.

Given the mental and physical challenges of deployment, some deployed members will experience burnout. **Burnout** is characterized as extreme exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed, often caused by periods of continuous and tremendous exertion with little time to rest. This exhaustion may be accompanied by feelings of failure, cynicism or doubt that your efforts make any difference to those you serve.

Burnout is not recognized as a mental health disorder, but can trigger or exacerbate other mental health problems, such as major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder or substance use disorder. In addition to behavioral health problems, the stress of deployment can greatly threaten your immune system and physical health.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies the following signs of burnout:

- ❑ Sense of failure, helplessness or hopelessness
- ❑ Decreased work satisfaction, believing nothing you do makes a difference
- ❑ Increased apathy or cynicism towards work, people or the future
- ❑ Feeling on edge or irritable about things that don't normally bother you
- ❑ Feeling emotionally detached from others or intentionally isolating from others
- ❑ Feeling chronically exhausted or consumed by others' problems
- ❑ Poor hygiene, diet or compliance with routine medical care

If you or a brother or sister were recently involved in a disaster relief operation, take a proactive role by focusing on these strategies for emotional and physical self-care:

Emotional Self-care

Pay attention to acute stress reactions. If you are experiencing repeated flashbacks, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts or are unable to function at work or home, tell someone. Talk to a trusted peer, your supervisor, your EAP or healthcare provider to see what mental health resources are available.

Resist the urge to isolate. Spending time alone after a traumatic experience only increases feelings of alienation, detachment and rumination. Even if you don't want to discuss your experience, simply being around family and friends can help restore a sense of normalcy and connection to others.

Find a daily coping outlet. Exercise, meditation, hands-on hobbies or practicing gratitude are effective ways to counter stress and keep life balanced.

Establish a buddy system with another deployed member. Mutual communication, encouragement and monitoring for stress reactions holds both of you accountable for practicing the self-care that is needed to recover after a deployment.

Reflect on your contribution. During your disaster work, you may have seen the worst of an already broken infrastructure or magnitude of human suffering. These experiences can leave you feeling cynical or hopeless in the wake of such large-scale devastation. Regardless of your role in the response, remember that your efforts helped restore quality of life to a devastated community. Focus on any positive results or successes from your assignment and share these reflections with your peers.

Physical Self-Care

Ensure proper food and fluid intake. A balanced diet and adequate hydration is essential to your post deployment recovery. Start each day with a healthy breakfast, plenty of vegetables and whole grains, and be sure to drink enough water by carrying a bottle with you.

Carefully monitor your physical health. In the wake of a natural disaster, contaminated water, mosquito born disease, mold and other environmental hazards pose tremendous health risks to responders and the public at large. Be sure to follow your department's protocol regarding vaccinations and carefully monitor any changes in your health that were not present prior to deployment. These may include open wounds, rashes, eye infections, nausea, vomiting, stomach cramping, diarrhea, fever, upper respiratory symptoms or allergic reactions.

Follow-up with your doctor. In addition to monitoring for any new health concerns, attend to pre-existing health conditions that may have taken a back seat to deployment. Annual physicals, preventative screenings and routine dental care are essential to maintaining your health.

If you need support:

Firestrong 24/7 Firefighter Family Crisis Support Line: 1-844-525-3473

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