



Helping the Helpers

Kansas State University • Cooperative Extension Service • Manhattan, Kansas

As flood waters recede, hundreds of people will still be on the front lines of disaster. Those people are the professional and volunteer helpers. The emotional needs of those who help others are often forgotten during crisis. They may not consider their own needs. Helpers seem to be invulnerable to fatigue, stress, frustration and depression. Perhaps the demand is so great they think they can “muster” through. But helpers need help, too.

The Long Race

“If I would have known that the ‘race’ was this long, I would have trained differently. I would have paced myself,” says Chuck Smith, Extension Specialist, Human Development. After setting up a retreat center for youths who had been displaced due to flood waters, Smith voluntarily supervised the retreat. Twelve-hour days included work with children, families and other disaster relief workers.

The uncertainty of when recovery will begin and when intense commitments will end creates anxiety for both volunteer and professional helpers. Crisis produces a wide range of stress symptoms among helpers which can appear immediately, in a few hours or within days of the event. Disaster helpers may experience:

- poor concentration
- memory problems
- poor attention span
- disrupted work-sleep-eating patterns
- withdrawal
- loss of emotional control
- fear
- guilt
- anger

- grief
- depression

Elizabeth O’Halloran, Canadian Red Cross Nurse says, “It’s important that we’re not isolated. It’s easy to stay at our stations (during the disaster) from morning to night and never leave. I have had to force myself to remember to eat and to rest at night.” O’Halloran, a professional helper who staffs disaster centers, identified that helpers can have difficulty keeping track of days and events, and that they often have a need to enforce structure and to “see normal life outside the disaster.”

“It’s not really stress, but a loss of ‘benchmarks’ in life—a loss of rhythm,” says Chuck Smith.

Helpers Can Help Themselves

Helpers need to take care of themselves. But that can be difficult for those who really enjoy what they are doing. Here are basic principles to help yourself stay in the “race:”

- learn to say no without feeling guilty
- take time for pleasure
- change your environment; take short breaks
- seek normality
- realize when a situation or problem should be referred to another helper
- be aware of your energy limits; stop when these limits have been reached
- prioritize your time
- know your strengths and weaknesses
- communicate with people who understand your endeavor
- practice “optimism” and “humor”

We Can Help the Helpers

Volunteer and professional helpers can use help from people not directly affected by crisis. “Community spirit and caring helps (helpers),” says O’Halloran. Connection to others and appreciation are important.

Specific ways to help helpers:

- help with everyday tasks
- invite the helper to talk about their experiences
- help the helper accept help; offer some thing specific instead of “call me if you need anything”
- do not rush the helper; their sense of time may be distorted
- reassure them that their stress is normal; most people recover well from stress
- when requested, provide information about the “world outside the disaster”
- respect their privacy
- encourage sensible health habits
- repeatedly show appreciation for the helper’s work

To help communities recover after disaster, the load must be shared. Smith says the experience has been enriching, but that helpers need to know that others are “willing to stand with them.”

The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

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