

STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR RESPONDERS, MANAGERS, AND VOLUNTEERS IN THE CONTEXT OF A DISASTER

A disaster constitutes a particular and unusual reality because of its sudden and unpredictable nature and the magnitude of the losses it causes. A disaster can disrupt the daily lives of those affected physically, psychologically, socially, materially, financially, and environmentally. Despite the uncertainties and losses it may cause, such a situation calls upon the ability of individuals, families, the community, and society as a whole to adapt and organize. In particular, it calls for mutual aid and the solidarity of all.

This fact sheet is an information tool for responders*, managers, and volunteers who, according to their respective roles, come to the aid of disaster victims, their loved ones, and the public. In addition to presenting the reactions that can be experienced in such circumstances, this fact sheet provides ways to better adapt to the situation, as well as information on the resources available.

Helping disaster victims can create a great sense of satisfaction and gratification. Everyone wants to feel useful and is highly motivated to help those in need. In the heat of the moment, however, one may tend to think of others first and have difficulty managing one's own stress.

Caught between a multitude of needs to be met and the lack of resources, responders, managers, or volunteers can also feel the impact of the disaster on their health, psychological balance, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

In the context of their involvement, responders may:

- work long hours under pressure, in a context marked by great uncertainty;
- lack resources and be confronted with the limits of their response;

* The term "responder" is used here to refer to anyone involved in any way in helping disaster victims. They may be workers from health and social services, emergency services, civil security, manual workers, managers, volunteers, municipal council members, or informal caregivers.

- › see their living and working conditions severely disrupted;
- › be less available to assume family responsibilities;
- › be confronted with criticism;
- › question their efficacy and competence;
- › operate on “autopilot”;
- › be affected themselves and feel torn between their own needs, those of their loved ones, and the needs of other victims;
- › not feel the stress that is building up.

Stress reactions

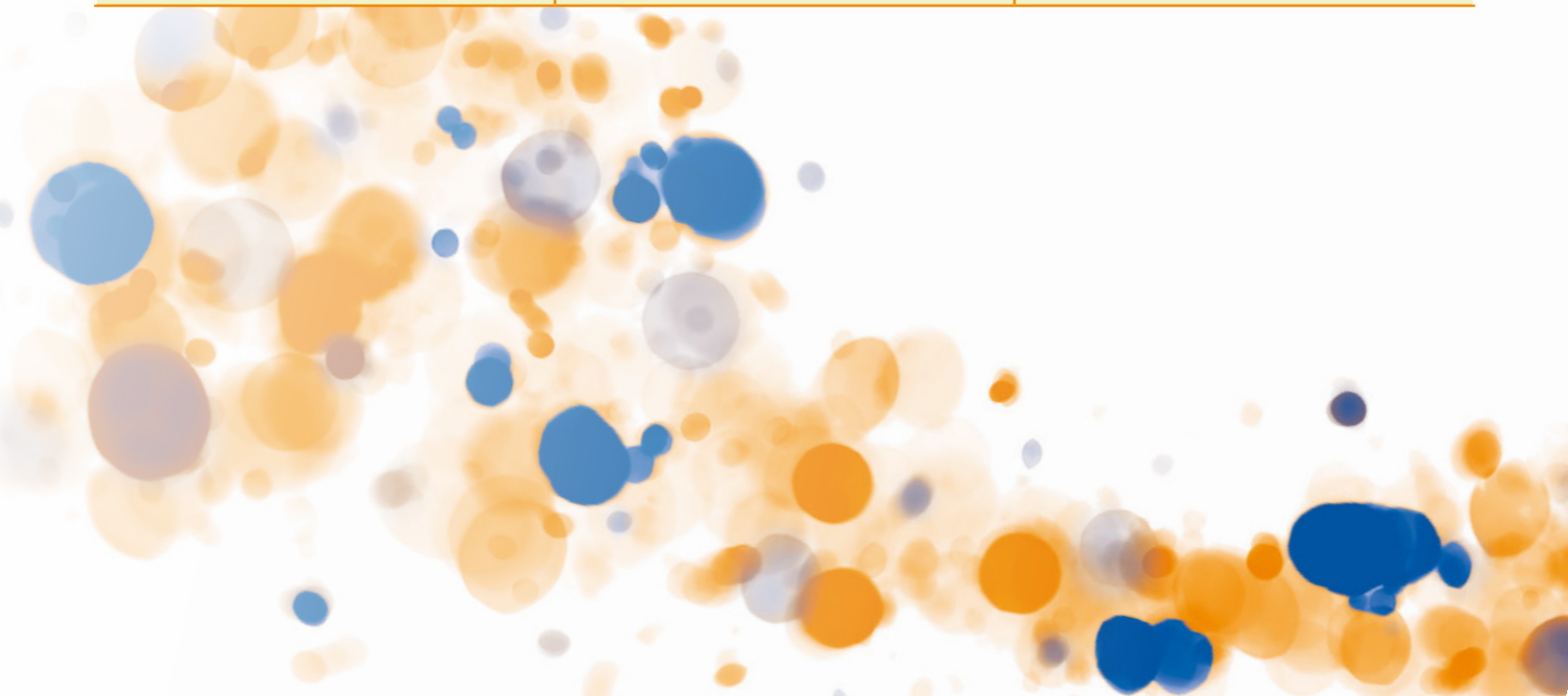
The responder may also experience a variety of physical, psycho-emotional, and behavioural stress reactions.

It is important to remember that these reactions are normal in the face of a situation that is not normal.

Usually, these reactions are short-lived. For some people, however, these reactions may be more severe and last longer. They may also appear at a later time. Certain past situations may also resurface and bring back difficult and unpleasant memories.

STRESS REACTIONS IN RESPONDERS

Physical	Psycho-emotional	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Fatigue › Increased blood pressure and heart rate › Muscle pain › Tremors › Headaches › Gastrointestinal pain › Sleep problems › Loss of appetite › Weight loss or gain › Weakened immune system › Loss of libido 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Anxiety › Euphoria › Confusion › Guilt › Depressive symptoms › Difficulty making decisions › Disorientation › Difficulty concentrating and paying attention › Feeling of helplessness › Grief, crying, despair › Anger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Isolation and distrust › Cynicism › Negative attitude › Irritability and aggressiveness › Increased consumption of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, etc. › Restlessness › Decreased motor skills › Interpersonal tensions › Denial of the fatigue and stress felt



Tips for better managing stress

Despite the demands of the situation, many people see their response experience in a positive light, which no doubt motivates them to continue day after day. Furthermore, in certain settings, there is a culture that often leads responders to reserve their own psychosocial reactions and, above all, to contain their emotions.

Dealing on a daily basis with the impacts of a disaster (distress, property damage, losses, social disruptions, service disruptions, uncertainty, etc.) can generate extraordinary stress and stealthily undermine psychological balance.

There are some things that can be done to help cope with stress and feel better that can be identified and incorporated into your daily life. These are numerous and often within easy reach. Here are some examples:

- › Maintain healthy lifestyle habits as much as possible (diet, hydration, sleep, breaks, physical exercise, relaxation, etc.);
- › Foster mutual support among responders, giving one another the right to talk about what you are experiencing and encourage one another;
- › Maintain a positive attitude;
- › Take advantage of the support activities offered by your organization;
- › Keep in touch with your loved ones and spend time with them, while accepting that you may have different experiences under the circumstances;
- › Maintain your routine as much as possible in terms of hobbies and moments of rejuvenation;
- › Avoid excessive exposure to media coverage of the event;
- › Set limits and respect them;
- › Limit your consumption of alcohol, caffeine, tobacco, etc.;
- › Be on the lookout for signs that you may be overstepping your limits: level of fatigue, changes in your mood, attitudes, and habits;
- › If you are affected by the disaster yourself, prioritize your own needs and those of your family as victims.

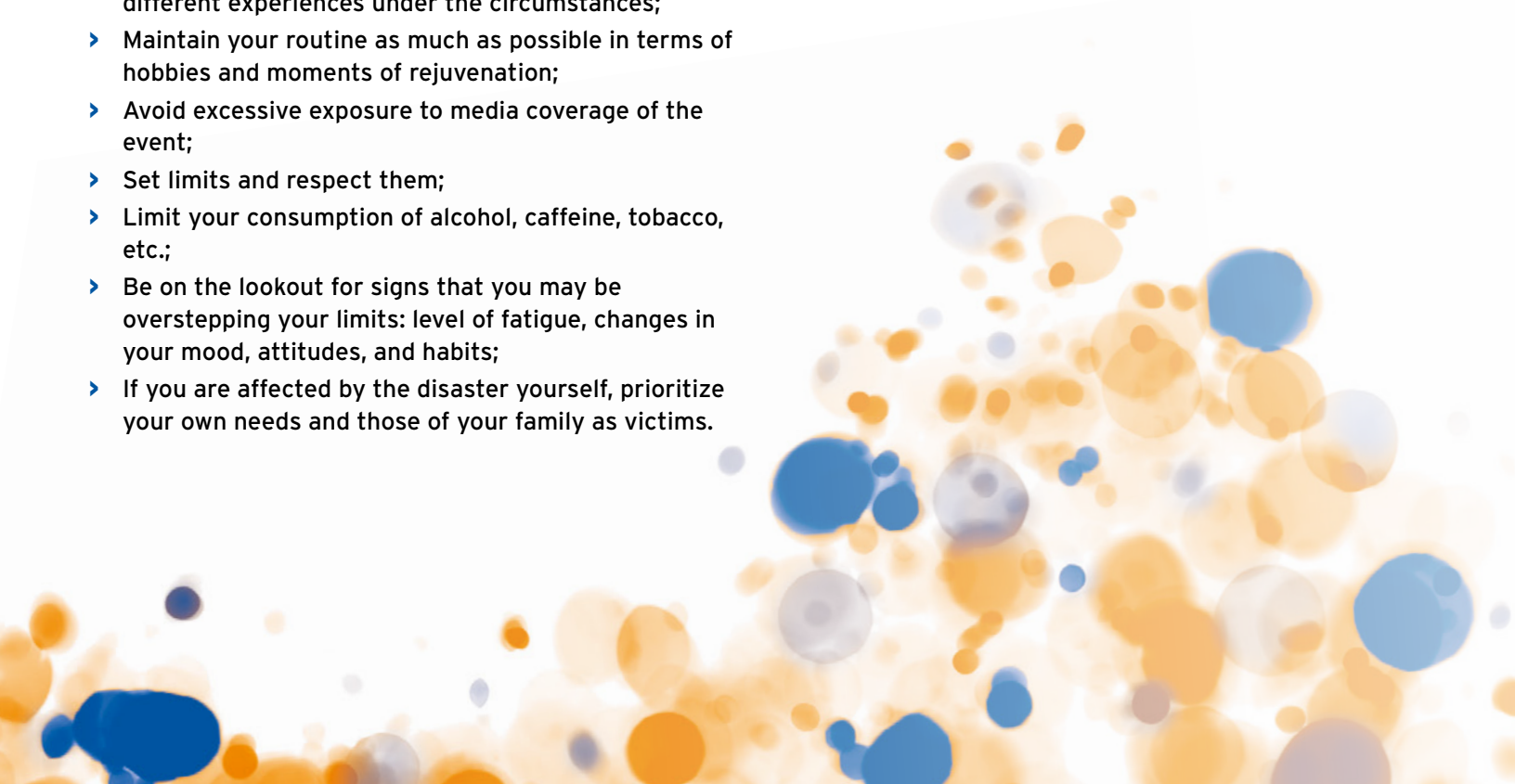
Although it is normal to feel the effects of such an event, it is possible to become insidiously bogged down in a process of exhaustion if one does not pay attention to one's own needs and fails to set limits. Over-identifying with the experiences of disaster victims can also lead to compassion fatigue, which can be defined as a difficulty in distinguishing the needs of victims.

When is it necessary to ask for help?

It is possible to seek help from a health and social services professional at any time and as soon as you feel the need. Here are some guidelines to let you know that you may need to seek help:

- › when there are serious difficulties in functioning normally in family activities, at work, in leisure activities, etc.;
- › when stress reactions remain intense instead of diminishing;
- › when you can no longer recover, feel overwhelmed, and are unable to return to your normal routine;
- › when you are concerned about your emotional reactions, behaviours, and use of alcohol, drugs, etc.

In such cases, don't hesitate to consult a health and social services professional



Available services:

- › Info-Social 811
- › Family medicine group (MFG)
- › Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- › Suicide Prevention:
1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)

Information is also available online:

- › Getting better following a disaster
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies/emergency-situations-disasters-and-natural-hazards/getting-better-following-disaster
- › Centre for studies on human stress
<https://humanstress.ca/>
- › Trauma Studies Center
trauma.criusmm.net/en/
- › Urgence Québec
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies

Frequent reactions among people faced with a disaster

Refer to the fact sheets
A disaster has occurred
or

As a responder, I have experienced a potentially traumatic event