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Coping with Disaster Returning Home From A Disaster Assignment

GOING HOME... *Disaster work can be a unique and very rewarding experience. Disaster response workers feel part of a family as we all work toward a common goal. There is a sense of adventure as we face the unique problems of each disaster setting, a sense of shared pride as we ease the suffering of victims, and a sense of personal satisfaction in our ability to help.*

We experience things that most people - including our families, friends, and co-workers - could not begin to understand or appreciate. This can be a serious problem when it is time to go home.

Rest Often, you may not get enough rest while working on a disaster, and when you return home you will feel exhausted. It may take several days to catch up, and both family members and employers need to understand that you need time to yourself before beginning a full schedule of normal activities.

Pace On an operation, you perform your job as fast as possible to provide the greatest amount of assistance in the shortest possible time. It may take time to return to the more relaxed pace of your co-workers and family members.

Sharing You will want to talk to family members and co-workers about your experiences, and they will be eager to tell you about theirs. What you were doing may seem much more exciting and significant, but remember that their experiences are as important to them as yours are to you. If they seem to accuse you of being away when the washer overflowed, or the kids threw up, it's only their way of saying, 'We missed you.'

Emotions When you return home, some feelings or emotional swings may surprise or frighten you. If you anticipate some of these emotions, you can manage them better.

Disappointment: You may find that others are not interested in hearing about your experiences, or that your reunion with your family and co-workers does not live up to your expectations. You may expect they will be happy to have you home and be surprised to find they are angry at your absence.

Frustration and conflict: Your needs may not match those of family or colleagues. While you may want nothing more than a

good home-cooked meal, your family may be looking forward to going out to eat.

Anger: Problems presented by your family, friends, or co-workers may seem very trivial compared to those facing the disaster victims you just left. Try to remember that the folks at home feel that their problems are just as important to them right now.

Victim identification: The actions or characteristics of people at home may remind you of your experience with disaster victims. You may experience emotional reactions that can surprise and confuse not only you, but also them. Try to make others understand the reasons behind your reactions.

Daydreaming: You may find yourself wishing you could return to the disaster you just left, or be sent out again right away. Remember you are more important to the folks at home than you can imagine; they just express their appreciation differently.

Mood swings: These are normal after returning home, one of the ways to resolve conflicting feelings you have experienced on the operation. You may change from happy to sad, tense to relaxed, or outgoing to quiet without much warning. When you have time to put your disaster work into perspective, they will pass.

Children It can be hard to explain to children why you must be away. If you tell them why you are leaving, and call home while you are away, it will help calm their fears. When you return home, try not to frighten them with stories about what you have seen and done. Tell them about the disaster, and involve them in preparedness efforts for your family. This will help them feel as if they are part of what you have been doing and reduce their fears about similar disasters at home.

For Further Assistance

While disaster experiences are very personal, problems like yours may have been encountered by other Emergency Social Services workers. If you have any unusual reactions that last for an extended period, feel free to contact your Emergency Social Services Director and ask to talk to an experienced Emergency Social Services worker. He or she will be able to understand what you are saying and provide appropriate feedback.

Your participation in disaster relief operations is very important to the entire organization, and we want to do everything possible to make it a rewarding and enriching experience.

**Emergency Social Services Office
Provincial Emergency Program
Phone toll free within B.C.:
1 800 585-9559**

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