



## **Information for 2010 Gulf Oil Spill Workers on TRAUMATIC INCIDENT STRESS**

### **Introduction**

Workers must respond quickly to environmental disasters, both natural and human-caused. As a responder to the Gulf Oil Spill, you are at risk of experiencing stress from what mental health professionals refer to as a *traumatic incident*. A *traumatic incident* is one that may involve exposure to catastrophic events such as the disruption to the natural cycle of life including dead or struggling wildlife, and rapidly evolving situations that cause significant and long term economic consequences. This pamphlet describes a range of ordinary reactions that you may experience during response and recovery efforts or in the weeks or months following your work with this unprecedented disaster. It is important to monitor your health and well being during this entire period, even months after your involvement with response efforts have ceased. In addition to monitoring yourself, this pamphlet also provides guidance about managing stress reactions and fatigue.

### **Symptoms of Stress**

You may experience many physical, cognitive (thinking), emotional, or behavioral symptoms of stress. These stress symptoms may occur immediately at the scene, or may occur weeks or months later, or not at all.

**Physical Symptoms include:**--Fatigue, Nausea/vomiting, Dizziness, Profuse sweating, Thirst, Headaches, Visual difficulties, Clenching of jaw, Nonspecific aches and pains, Disturbed sleep, Upset stomach.

If you are feeling any of the following symptoms, you should seek IMMEDIATE medical attention:

--Chest pain, Difficulty breathing, Severe pain, Symptoms of shock (shallow breathing, rapid or weak pulse, nausea, shivering, pale and moist skin, mental confusion, and dilated pupils)

### **Cognitive Symptoms**

If these problems occur while you are on the job, you may not be able to stay focused, which could impair your ability to be mindful of your safety while working to successfully complete your assigned task:

--Confusion, Disorientation, Heightened or lowered alertness, Poor Concentration, Poor problem solving, Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people, Memory problems, Reduced attention span, Calculation difficulties



## **Emotional Symptoms**

*Strong emotions can be ordinary reactions to a traumatic or extraordinary situation!*  
You should seek mental health support if symptoms interfere with your daily life or if they don't seem to go away after several weeks:

--Anxiety, Guilt, Denial, Grief, Fear, Irritability, Loss of emotional control, Depression, Sense of failure, Feeling Overwhelmed, Blaming others or self, Hyper-vigilance, Severe panic (rare).

## **Behavioral Symptoms**

--Intense anger, Withdrawal, Difficulty with emotional control, leading to emotional outburst or unusual aggression, Temporary loss or increase of appetite, Excessive alcohol, caffeine, and/or tobacco consumption, Inappropriate use of medications, Use of street drugs, Inability to rest, Pacing, Change in sexual functioning

Some of these symptoms may be the result of fatigue.

## **Recommendations to Monitor and Maintain Health On-Site**

You may not recognize the need to take care of yourself and to monitor your own emotional and physical health. This is especially true as response efforts stretch into several weeks. The following guidelines contain simple methods for you to help yourself and fellow response workers. You must stay vigilant while on the job – to take care of your own health and safety. You must be able to stay focused on the job – especially given the chaotic and dynamic disaster work environment. Please read these guidelines while at your job site and again after you return home.

### **Control the organization and pace of the rescue and recovery efforts:**

- Pace yourself. Response efforts at the site may continue for days or weeks.
- Watch out for each other. Co-workers may be intensely focused on a particular task and may not notice a hazard nearby or behind.
- Be conscious of those around you. You may feel exhausted, feeling stressed or even temporarily distracted which may place you and others at risk.
- Take frequent rest breaks. The response operations are taking place in hazardous work environments. Mental fatigue, particularly over long shifts can place you at greatly increased risk for injury.

### **Maintain adequate nutrition, hydration and rest**

- Eat and sleep regularly. Maintain as normal a schedule as possible and adhere to the team schedule and rotation.



- Make sure that you drink plenty of fluids such as water and juices.
- Try to eat a variety of foods and increase your intake of complex carbohydrates (for example, breads and muffins made with whole grains, granola bars).
- Whenever possible, take breaks away from the work area. Eat and drink in the cleanest area available.

### **Monitor mental/emotional health**

- Recognize and accept what you cannot change – the chain of command, organizational structure, waiting, equipment failures, etc.
- Talk to people when **YOU** feel like it. You decide when you want to discuss your experience. Talking about an event may make you feel like you are reliving it. Choose your own comfort level.
- If your employer provided you with formal mental health support, use it!
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten or discouraged from time to time: You are in a difficult situation.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks can be common – do not try to fight them. They should decrease over time.
- Communicate with your loved ones at home as frequently as possible.

### **Recommendations to Maintain Health following the Incident**

Over time, your impressions and understanding of your experience will change. This process is different for everyone. No matter what the event or your reaction to it, you can follow some basic steps to help yourself adjust to the experience:

- Reach out – people really do care.
- Reconnect with family, spiritual, and community supports.
- Consider keeping a journal. Spend time with others or alone and do the things you enjoy to refresh and recharge yourself.
- Remember that "getting back to normal" takes time. Gradually work back into your routine. Let others carry more weight for a while at home and at work.



- Be aware that assuming your normal activities is not a straight path but can be a matter of two steps forward and one back. You will make progress.
- Appreciate a sense of humor in yourself and others.
- Your family may experience certain parts of the disaster along with you through your stories and the news media. This is a time for understanding and communication.
- Avoid overuse of drugs or alcohol. You do not need to complicate your situation with a potential substance abuse problem.
- Get plenty of rest and normal exercise. Eat well balanced, regular meals.

## Additional Resources

### **National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)**

**1-800-35-NIOSH, [www.cdc.gov/niosh](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh)**

*Oil spill response resources* - <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/OilSpillResponse/>

*Traumatic incident topic page* - <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/traumaticincident/>

### **Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS)**

*Dealing with the Effects of Trauma: A Self Help Guide* -

[http://www.centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org/csts\\_items/SHG\\_Effects\\_of\\_trauma.pdf](http://www.centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org/csts_items/SHG_Effects_of_trauma.pdf)

### **U.S. National Response Team (NRT)**

*Guidance for Managing Worker Fatigue during Emergency Operations* -

[http://nrt.org/production/NRT/NRTWeb.nsf/AllAttachmentsByTitle/SA-1049TADFinal/\\$File/TADfinal.pdf?OpenElement](http://nrt.org/production/NRT/NRTWeb.nsf/AllAttachmentsByTitle/SA-1049TADFinal/$File/TADfinal.pdf?OpenElement)

### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

*Emergency Mental Health and Traumatic Stress* -

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/>

*Tips for Talking About Disasters* -

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/after.asp>

### **National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

*Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide* -

[http://ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/nc\\_manual\\_psyfirstaid.html](http://ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/nc_manual_psyfirstaid.html)