

Supporting the Psychosocial Well-being and Resilience of Frontline Workers and Disaster Management Professionals during the Novel Corona virus (COVID-19) Pandemic

Disaster Management Professionals and Frontline Workers involved in the preparedness, control and relief services pertaining to the outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic are susceptible to stress associated with physical, mental, and social problems including fatigue, occupational burnout, anxiety, depression and other mental health problems that may impact productivity and efficiency at work and negatively impact their well-being.

This stress can be intensified with workforce shortages, fear of being infected or infecting the family, exposure of a worker to the virus and a fatality among the DM workers, stigmatization at the community level due to their exposure to the affected community and subsequent deterioration of their social networks, exposure to prolonged stress and disruptions to normal patterns of life in case the outbreak lengthens.

It is therefore very crucial to take steps to protect the psychosocial well-being of the frontline workers and professionals in the disaster management sector which will range from self-care guidance to provision of access to specialised services for serious mental health problems. However, the overall focus should be on enhancing coping and personal resiliency which can be achieved through:

- Providing them all necessary Personal Protective Equipment and ensuring all safety measures to give them confidence
- Provision of accurate and up-to-date information on COVID-19 and how they can protect themselves and their families and ensure that they understand the guidance provided
- Reinforcing positive coping skills and natural support systems that enable workers to better manage their emotional and psychological reactions
- Instil a positive and future oriented sense of hope so that they can adapt themselves with the situation

The following actions could be considered by DM authorities and employers for protecting the psychosocial well-being of the employees, using the components of Psychological First Aid (PFA):

- Provide regular and accurate information updates to mitigate fears and uncertainties arising due to the spread of COVID-19.
- Acknowledge and reinforce the importance of DM workers in managing the response
- Acknowledge and appreciate the additional workloads and disruptions to their lives.
- Involve staff in the planning processes to ensure that their perspectives and needs are understood and considered.
- Regular re-enforcement of the importance of self-care and mutual support

- Cognisance of events that are likely to escalate fears and anxieties and helping to assuage those fears
 - Reinforce the importance of team cohesion and mutual support through messaging, virtual support options and web-based systems
 - Maintain appropriate working hours with regular breaks for staff. When able and within applicable legal limits, rotate workers from higher-stress to lower-stress functions; partner inexperienced workers with more experienced colleagues, who can provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety practices; implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted or have a family member impacted by the outbreak
 - Encourage managers to regularly and supportively monitor the well-being of staff and speak openly about stress
 - Identify staff who are at higher risk of psychosocial stress and distress as a result of COVID-19
 - Consider referral to psychiatrists / psychologists of those staff with acute mental health problems who don't respond to Psychological First Aid(PFA).
 - Managers should prepare employees for the potentially negative experience of self-isolation including policies for compensation and sick leave. They should be assured of basic living needs for themselves and their households if there is need for self isolation.
 - Managers should be in regular touch with the self isolating staff to make them feel supported and facilitate their return to work.
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