



OIF TIP – HOW TO FACE THE INJURED AND DEAD



In combat or disaster situations, you may see, hear, smell, and perhaps have to handle badly injured and dead people. There may be a few or very many, depending on the extent of the tragedy. They may be men and women of all age.

You may be struck with combinations of pity, horror, repulsion, and anger at the senselessness or malice of the event. You may feel guilty for failing to prevent it, for surviving it, or for not helping enough. These reactions are normal, a part of being human. You may blame yourself or the U.S.A. It hurts most when a victim reminds you of someone you love, or yourself.

Keep in mind that these feelings are honorable, and confirm your humanity. At times, however, you may feel emotionally numb, and may use "graveyard humor" to make the suffering and deaths seem less terrible. Whatever you feel, remember that the mission must continue.

If you are in this situation, here are lessons learned by people who faced such horrible experiences. These tips can help you do the mission and live with the memories without being haunted by them.

1. Remember the larger purpose of what you must do. You are showing care, giving hope, and preventing disease for the living. You are recovering the bodies for registrations and respectful burial.
2. Limit exposure to the stimuli: don't sightsee; use screens, poncho curtains, partitions, covers, body bags, and barriers to keep away anyone who does not need to see.
3. Wear gloves and disposable uniforms if available.
4. Mask odors with disinfectants, deodorants, air-fresheners. Save perfumes or aftershaves for afterwards. Don't be surprised when odors trigger memories.
5. Be compassionate, but **AVOID FOCUSING** on any individual victims, especially those you most identify with. Don't focus on personal effects.
6. Have people who did NOT search the body examine any materials collected for identification of the body or intelligence.
7. Remind yourself the body is not "the person," just the remains.

8. Keep humor alive, even "graveyard humor" with buddies who understand it, but don't get too gross or too personal (e.g. no picking on each other).
9. Don't desecrate or steal from the victims—those are UCMJ crimes.
10. Say silent prayers; ask unit or local ministers to conduct memorial services.
11. Schedule frequent breaks; maintain hygiene, drink plenty of fluids, and eat good food. Command should arrange facilities for washing hands and face, and later showers and fresh clothes.
12. Have your team get together for mutual support and encouragement. Acknowledge horrible aspects, but don't dwell on these memories of details.
13. Help buddies or subordinates in distress by being a good listener. Don't jump in with "off the shelf" answers. Don't mistake feelings as weakness. Say they are normal and honorable. Remind them that the mission must go on, and the team needs everyone.
14. If forewarned of the mission, prepare yourself for what you will see and do; take the supplies and equipment mentioned above.
15. Afterwards, don't feel guilty about having distanced yourself mentally from the suffering or tragic deaths of individuals.
16. Don't be disheartened by horrible dreams, feeling tense, or intrusive memories. Those are normal, and it is better to have them now than to suppress them. Don't keep them hidden. Share them with your buddies, and keep that positive humor alive.
17. 1-3 days after exposure, participate in a critical event debriefing with trained people from your supporting unit ministry and/or behavioral health/combat stress control team.

These techniques and coping skills cannot make a horrible and tragic event acceptable or easy, but they can help you and your teammates better cope with the stress in order to complete the mission. Be proud of what you have done, and use these lessons learned to take care of yourself, your buddies, and your family when you get home.

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