

Dealing With the Stress of Recovering Human Dead Bodies

THE MISSION

One consequence of humanitarian and recovery operations is coming in contact with bodies of people that have died under tragic or horrible circumstances. You may be assigned the mission of recovering, processing and perhaps burying human remains. The victims may include women, elderly people, or small children and infants for whom we feel an innate empathy. Being exposed to children who have died can be especially distressing, particularly for individuals who have children of their own.

Extensive experience has been gained from working with body recovery teams during past operations. This information helped them cope with the memories, and it can help you, your co-workers, and your organization take this difficult mission in stride. You can complete the operation proud of what you have done, and return to your usual duties, career and family life without being unduly troubled by the memories — even when those memories include some very sad, unpleasant or distressing details.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Some body recovery operations involve situations where there are no living survivors. Other situations take place in concert with ongoing rescue, emergency medical care, and survivor assistance activities. In the latter case, the reactions of the living victim may include grief, anger, shock, gratitude or ingratitude, numbness or indifference. Their reactions may interact with your own reactions to the dead. In some situations, the bodies may be distorted or mutilated. Seeing mutilated bodies invokes an innate horror in most human beings, although most of us quickly form a kind of tough mental "shell," so we won't feel so badly.

To some extent, we come to see the remains simply as objects, without reflecting that they were once people. Often the bodies are burned, crushed, or otherwise damaged. Sometimes, however, the cause of death leaves few signs on the bodies (e.g. drowning or smoke victims). Rescue operations personnel often say this is harder to adapt to because of the difficulty in forming that "shell." Of course, the degree of decomposition of the bodies will be determined by the temperature and climate, and by how long it has been before you can reach them and begin collection.

In addition to seeing mutilated or non-mutilated bodies, you will often have to smell the bodies and other associated strong odors. You may have to touch the remains, move them, and perhaps hear the sounds of autopsies being performed, or other burial activities. These sensations may place a strain on your capacity to do the work and/or may trouble you with nightmares and memories. We will list below things you can do to help this.

Being exposed to large numbers of dead bodies is not a normal part of human experience. Therefore, when you are exposed to bodies, you should not be surprised that you have thoughts and feelings you are not used to. You may experience sorrow, regret, repulsion, disgust, anger, and futility. **REMEMBER, THESE ARE NORMAL RESPONSES TO THE ABNORMAL SITUATION IN WHICH YOU HAVE BEEN PLACED.** In fact, it would be surprising if you did not have at least some of these emotions.

You may start to see similarities between yourself (or others you love) and those who have died. This could lead to feelings of guilt ("Why wasn't it me?" or "Why can't I do more to stop it?") or anxiety ("It could have been me"). Again, these feelings are **NORMAL** given the situation.

Humor is a normal human reaction or "safety valve" for very uncomfortable feelings. In body handling situations, it naturally tends towards what is aptly called "graveyard humor." Don't be surprised at finding this in yourself or others.

GUIDELINES FOR HOW TO WORK WITH HUMAN REMAINS:

- **Prepare yourself** for what you will be seeing and doing as much as time and access to information allows. It is better to be prepared for the worst and not have to face it than to be ill prepared.
 - *Learn as much as you can* about the history, cultural background, and circumstances of the disaster or tragedy. How did it come to happen? Try to understand it the way a historian or neutral investigation commission would.
 - *Look at video and photographs of the area of operation and of the victims.* The television news networks and news magazines may be sources. If pictures of the current situation are not available, look up ones from previous similar tragedies in the library archives. Share them as a team, and talk about them.
- **Understand the importance and value of what you are doing:**
 - Remember that you are *helping the deceased to receive a respectful burial* (even if in some cases, it must be a hasty and mass burial). You are saving their remains the indignity of simply being left on the ground to decay.
 - In some cases, you are helping survivors know their loved ones have died, rather than lingering in uncertainty. Those relatives or friends can then take the bodies for private burial, or at least know where they are buried. This *gives them closure so they can move on* with their lives.
 - By collecting or burying the bodies of those who have already died, you are *providing a safer, healthier environment for those individuals still living.*
- **Focus on the larger purpose you are serving without attempting to relate to each individual who has died:**
 - Remember that *the body is not the person, but only the remains.*
 - Some people who have done this important work have found it helpful to *think of the remains as wax models or mannequins* (as if in a training exercise), or as memorial models to which they were showing the respect due to the original person who was no longer there.
 - If your job requires you to collect personnel effects from the bodies for identification, intelligence or other official purposes, *do not let yourself look closely at or read those personal effects.* The people who need to examine those effects are advised to do so remote from, and preferably without having seen, the body.
 - *Do not desecrate or take souvenirs from the bodies.* Those are criminal acts.
 - *Humor, even graveyard humor, is helpful if it remains on a witty and relatively abstract level.* It is unhelpful when it becomes too gross, too personal (e.g. comments or practical jokes which pick on members of the team), or too disrespectful of the individual dead. Some members of the team may become upset at excessive graveyard humor, and even the joker may remember it with guilt years later.
 - You can *say prayers for the dead and conduct whatever personal ceremonies your own beliefs and background recommend.* The unit chaplain and/or local clergy may also conduct rites or ceremonies. Even very brief rites at the time can help, perhaps to be followed by larger, formal ceremonies later.

- **Take steps to limit exposure to the stimuli from the bodies:**
 - *Use screens, partitions, covers, body bags or barriers to block people from seeing the bodies unless it is necessary to their mission.*
 - *Wear gloves and masks if the job calls for touching the bodies.*
 - *It may help to mask the odor with disinfectants, air-fresheners, or deodorants. Using other scents such as perfume or aftershave lotions are of limited value in the presence of the bodies. Take care how and which scents are used as they can easily become mentally linked to the rescue operation, bringing back memories of the experience for a while thereafter.*

- **Take care of yourself and each other:**
 - *When the mission allows, take frequent short breaks away from the immediate recovery area and the temporary mortuary.*
 - *Drink plenty of fluids, continue to eat well, and especially maintain good hygiene. To the extent possible, leadership should assure facilities for washing hands, clothing, and taking hot showers after each shift. If water must be rationed, leadership should make clear what can be provided and how it should be used and conserved.*
 - *Hold team after-action debriefings frequently to talk out the worst and the best things about what has occurred, sharing thoughts, feelings and reactions with your teammates.*
 - *A mental health/stress control team or chaplain may be able to lead a Critical Event Debriefing after a particularly bad event or at the end of the operation.*
 - *Plan team as well as individual activities to relax and get your mind off of the recovery operation. Don't feel guilty about this, or about not being able to fix the tragedy immediately. YOU MUST PACE YOURSELVE FOR THE TASK, AND DO WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE, ONE STEP AT A TIME.*
 - *Stay physically fit.*
 - *Within security guidelines, keep your family and significant others fully informed about what is happening.*
 - *Take special care of new unit members, and those with recent changes or special problems back home.*
 - *If your a coworker, subordinate or superior shows signs of distress, give support and encouragement, and try to get the other person to talk through the problems or feelings that they are having. By working with each other, you both will be better able to cope with the situation in which you must work.*

- **If the stress caused by working with the remains begins to interfere with your performance, your ability to relax, or if you feel that you are becoming overwhelmed, TAKE ACTION. Do not ignore the stress.**
 - *Do not to withdraw from others and become isolated.*
 - *Seek out someone to talk with about how you are feeling. This might be a buddy, a family member, a chaplain, a medic, or a combat stress control/mental health team member. Chances are, other people are feeling the same things you are.*
 - *Leadership and/or the community can often help.*

- **After you have completed your mission and are no longer working around the bodies, you may experience a variety of feelings.** These may include feeling bad about not treating each body as an individual, and needing to express the emotions that were pent up while you were doing the work of body recovery. **DO NOT KEEP THESE EMOTIONS INSIDE.** They are normal, and are best worked through by talking with your fellow unit members.

- *Take part in end-of-operation debriefings and pre-homecoming briefings.*

- If you are in a leadership role, *ensure that the team and its members are appropriately recognized and honored* for their efforts. Be sure to include the families, and recognize their prayers, patience, and fortitude during the operation.

- *Don't be surprised if being at home brings back upsetting memories from the operation.* You may find it hard to talk about the memories with family or friends who weren't there. This is very common. Try to talk about them anyway. Also stay in touch with your teammates from the operation.

- **If you still find yourself upset, don't hesitate talk with a chaplain or with a mental health provider in your area.** This is just wise preventive maintenance.

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